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*teen films*

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VIETNAM • PETER WATKINS' *THE JOURNEY*

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**The Wanderers:** Ken Wahl and Karen Allen.



# Editorial

In its early planning stages *CineAction! 12* was to be devoted to the discussion of the teen film. While we have maintained this focus, our theme has been somewhat extended to include two articles on Vietnam war films. We see significant connections between this recent subgenre, which has now achieved such popular status that it includes

two weekly television series, and the teen genre which at its height, generated its own TV spinoffs. We feel that these genres are worthy of study, if for reasons of their pervasiveness and popularity alone. Moreover, while the teen film performs a powerful ideological function (as do all forms of popular culture) by helping to



define the teenager and, in particular, his/her relationship to the 'adult world,' it is significant that with the waning of this predominantly male centered genre, the Vietnam war films have, at least partially, filled the 'boy's film' vacuum. In their most reactionary form ( the Rambo films, for example) they tend to reinforce popular myths of the potency and the desirability of masculinity: action, power and dominance. The articles on *Platoon* and *Full Metal Jacket* both address the issue of masculinity in these films.

The films that constitute the teen genre present anything but a consistent view of the teenager and the articles published here suggest that variety. The films discussed feature teens from the middle class to the working class, Canadian teens and American teens, and include both those made about teens and those made for teen audiences. While some important films are not represented, the most notable omission is the films of John Hughes. His work must be seen as having set the standard for the '80s teen film. Unlike the Hughes films, most of those discussed here have been produced at the margins of Hollywood, or outside the Hollywood system altogether. And, with the exception of *River's Edge*, they have not received broad critical and/or popular attention.

We open this section of teen/Vietnam films with an article on identification, questions of audience response being particularly pertinent to these films. This theoretical essay is a response to Laura Mulvey's seminal work "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," and the various strands of debate that have followed its publication. We feel that it is an important addition to that debate.

We include in this issue an article and interview whose respective subjects, while radically different in form, tone and theme, share the distinction of being independently produced and of being oppositional political

films, dealing as they both do, with issues of domination. The article on Peter Watkins' documentary, *The Journey*, recounts the attempt in that film to discuss the politics of nuclear armament in the broadest global terms. The interview, with David Burton Morris and Gwen Fields, creators of *Patti Rocks*, is an open discussion of the sexual politics of personal relationships, a more focused though no less significant issue.

We conclude with reader's letters. There has been considerable response to Bryan Bruce's discussion of the *Naked Eye* screenings (*CineAction! 10*) from film makers who took part in the event. We publish in our letters section both their letters and Bryan Bruce's reply. As always, we welcome responses to *CineAction!*

**Anthony Irwin  
Susan Morrison**



# Making The Journey with Peter Watkins

by Ken Nolley

PETER WATKINS' NEW FILM, *THE JOURNEY*, is not simply Peter Watkins' film. It challenges the idea of traditional authorship and ownership in the cinema in a powerful way, attempting to give greater voice and control to the many people who participated in the process of its production, making them active, participating subjects rather than passive, manipulated objects. The result is a striking film, one that invites participation from the audience as richly as it invited participation from the widely varied persons, groups, and cultures who worked on it. As one of the many, many participants in the process, I should like here to discuss the film, the process of its production, its form, and what the film might be able to continue to do if it finds audiences in North America and elsewhere in the world.

One needs to say at the outset, too, that *The Journey* is not a film in the usual sense. Its length alone, 14½ hours, places it well outside the conventional expectations people have of the cinema, challenging both the viewer and a distribution system in a way that even Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, at 9½ hours, did not. Like *Shoah*, *The Journey* draws heavily on filmed interviews with participants in past events in order to get at an understanding of how human beings are able to engage in acts that we like to term unthinkable. But whereas *Shoah* sets out to explore the holocaust, a past (albeit repeatable) event, *The Journey* sets out to explore the militarization of our planet as a result of a constituted sense of a terrifying *other*, an ongoing process that includes the last holocaust, current social practice, and the troubled future of our species.

Given the ambitious scope of *The Journey's* subject, then, its length certainly seems justifiable when measured by the standard of Lanzmann's film. What is not yet clear, though, is how to adjust audience expectation and the distribution system to accommodate a project like this. Indeed, so far most screenings of *The Journey* at various festivals have been concentrated in single weekends in a theatre, expanding and stretching the usual expectations of a theatrical film. But there is still much to be learned about what other screening possibilities might exist for films of such unconventional and



Peter Watkins

uncompromising length. There is also much to be learned about how to move effectively against the forces of naked power and entrenched privilege in our world, and *The Journey* invites participation in that process, just as it asks for more commitment and patience than usual from its audience. In its length alone, *The Journey* asks to be taken more as a process for engagement than as a product for purchase. And finally, this level of commitment that the film demands from its audience also sets it off from most other films, even a film like *Shoah*.

## B E G I N N I N G S

In an important sense, *The Journey* probably began in the fall of 1965 as the BBC first postponed, then banned *The War Game*, Watkins' second film. A simulated treatment of the effects of a nuclear attack on Britain, *The War Game* provoked an intense controversy both inside and outside the BBC due especially to the intensity with which the film approached its subject and also, probably, to the political commitment of the film.<sup>1</sup> Although the BBC finally released the film in 16mm to the British Film Institute in 1966, they upheld their ban on the transmission of the film for 20 years, not only refusing to broadcast it themselves, but preventing its transmission elsewhere in the world as well. The long and troubled history of the film has been discussed at length by both Joseph Gomez and James Welsh.<sup>2</sup>

Watkins left the BBC as a result of *The War Game* controversy and pursued a difficult career that continued to spark controversy because of the challenges his work posed to traditional media forms, both in film and television. He worked once more in Britain and once in America, but mostly in Scandinavia after 1965, making a number of strikingly original films, the most distinguished of which, I believe, was *Edvard Munch* (1974), a biographical study of the life and work of the Norwegian expressionist painter. Though he treated themes of violence and social control in films like *The Gladiators* (Sweden, 1969), *Punishment Park* (U.S., 1971), *The Trap* (Sweden, 1975), and *Evening Land* (Denmark, 1977), he did not return directly to the subject of the arms race in his subsequent work.



In 1981, Watkins was in Sweden working on a film on August Strindberg, a project backed by the Swedish Film Institute. Late in that year, in the midst of a general financial crisis at the Institute, the Strindberg project collapsed. At just about the same time, Watkins was approached by Frank Allaun, a Labour MP in Britain, who inquired whether Watkins would be interested in returning to Britain in January of 1981 to begin work on a highly unusual project that was to be funded jointly by a grass roots fundraising campaign handled through peace organizations and by Central Television, an independent TV company.

The intent was to plan, through the spring of 1982, a film to be shot in various locations in Britain, and to begin actual filming by midsummer. Watkins was keenly interested in the project, especially because it extended the process of collaboration greatly. Watkins had, from the beginning of his career, worked with amateur actors who were encouraged to contribute their own ideas and experiences to the roles they portrayed. The *Nuclear War Film*, as the project was called, brought members of the public into the film much earlier, as collaborators in the funding process and on the planning and developing of the scenario.

I first entered the project at this stage. Having met Watkins briefly at a retrospective of his work in 1978, I had decided that I would like to move beyond the comfortable detachment of teaching and writing about completed films, and to observe the process of production as well. So, courtesy of a research grant, I joined Watkins in Britain in early May and followed the late planning process as it moved toward the shooting stage set for mid-summer. At the time, I had no idea that what I was setting out to do would so transform my understanding of the role of the critic, or that this seemingly limited venture would lead to the extensive on-going relationship with Watkins' work that has evolved for me.

I joined the project as Watkins was involved in a rather intense round of meetings with local groups who were already busy beginning to plan for shooting in their own areas. The meetings were also intended to rally more local support, to find and involve the numbers of persons necessary to stage and support the sequences planned in each area.

However, just as the series of meetings was drawing to a close and final shooting plans were being developed, the project collapsed in June when Central Television abruptly decided to withdraw from the project. Central argued that the decision was a purely economic one and that the film had grown beyond their resources; Watkins charged that the decision was politically motivated and linked it to the banning of *The War Game* earlier.<sup>3</sup> Whatever the reason, the collapse revealed a considerable gap between what Watkins and his peace movement collaborators envisioned and what the mainstream media were willing to buy into.

Early in 1983, Watkins went to the US to search for funding for a similar project based in North America, but he was unable to find any commercial funding sources in either television or cinema willing to commit to such a project. One main objection Watkins received repeatedly was to his projected method of working, of developing a scenario in collaboration with a public as they became involved in the film. Those rejections stiffened Watkins' resolve to undertake a project that he increasingly defined as a struggle to wrest control of the image from the heavily bureaucratized and conservative media establishment. And as he fought to get the means to make another film about the nuclear arms race, increasingly he saw links between the

repressive social structures engendered by the arms race and the control exerted over public images by that establishment.

*The Journey* began to move more directly toward its final form in the summer of 1983 when Svenska Freds, the oldest of the Swedish peace organizations, offered to head up a world-wide fundraising drive, predominantly from grass roots sources, to make a global film on the arms race, a film to be planned in conjunction with local community groups from various countries worldwide. This development was critical, for now, finally, the arms race could be examined as a global problem, a human problem, and not merely as the national problem that emerges in most peace films produced in a single country.

During the summer of 1983, Watkins began the first of several circuits of the globe, locating interested individuals, developing local support groups who could raise funds, research local involvement in the arms race, and plan local filming. Once again I became involved in the project because Watkins' spring trip to the US had included a stop in Oregon. Watkins had been particularly moved by the warmly supportive response to his work in the Portland area and thus Portland, along with Utica, New York and Seattle, Washington became one of the locations for the US shooting of the film.

In other countries the process probably worked differently, given the unique realities of each culture. The developed countries, of course, offered greater opportunities for fundraising than did the Third World, and money had to be raised in wealthier countries to support the filming in others. Always the fundraising was a struggle, and in the US, for example, far less was raised than originally projected, allowing less support for filming in Mexico than intended.

Particularly, the links between global concerns and local organizing were very difficult to articulate to potential donors, given the lack of any precedents for the project. Large, centralized peace organizations organized at a national level often were reluctant to divert funds from items already established on their agenda for a project that seemed so diffuse. And local funding sources had an equally difficult time justifying a global project as a local concern. These difficulties point up one strikingly unusual and politically important aspect of the project; it was designed to link up local organizing and local concerns with global issues, modeling both an important form of political awareness and an unusual form of political action.

In Oregon, most of the \$26,000 raised locally in the Portland/Salem area, where I live, finally came from benefit concerts and screenings, from art auctions, walk-a-thons and the like. Similar efforts were made in Seattle and Utica, although the New York fundraising was supplemented by a generous \$20,000 grant from the New York Council on the Arts. Finally, sufficient funding was raised to make the filming possible, and the National Film Board of Canada made the extraordinary gesture of providing editing facilities and funds for the project, agreeing to see the film through the post-production period and to strike prints in English and French.

Then, late in 1983, as the fundraising and early organizing was getting underway, a final significant event occurred that was to have a profound influence on the shape of the finished film; following an intense campaign of media hype, ABC television in the US released *The Day After*, its soap opera-styled treatment of nuclear war. Watkins and the project had, until that time, been working with the idea of a three part organization rather like *The War Game*, which simulated, in



turn, a period of mounting tension before a nuclear war, scenes of an actual attack, and a post-attack period of social collapse. Watkins had intended to intercut these simulated scenes with sequences of local families and groups actually discussing the problem of the arms race and what they might do about it.

*The Day After*, however, thoroughly undermined Watkins' belief in the social utility of creating scenes of nuclear devastation. While it was clear that *The Day After* was a poor imitation of *The War Game*, Watkins felt it was also clear that the nuclear war film was developing the characteristics of a genre and that the genre itself contributed to the general passivity and despair felt around the world to the subject of the arms race. Better, he felt, to present a nuclear holocaust as something to be avoided (and thus not to show it), than to create ever more grippingly real visions of our collective immolation that feed on paranoia and paralysis.

At that point, Watkins decided to abandon entirely his plan of simulating a nuclear war, with the exception of a few sequences where the film would recreate civil defense plans in order to highlight their inherent absurdity. Instead, he decided to turn the film even more over to the local spokespersons who would appear in the film, making individual and collective human comment the center, and not an accompanying theme, of the entire film.

Early in 1984, filming actually began. Watkins again went round the world, moving from community to community, using local film crews wherever possible (only in three locations, I believe, was it necessary to bring in outside crew members). By the time filming was complete in early 1985, about 120 hours of film had been exposed in 12 countries around the world — Canada, the US, Mexico, Japan, Tahiti, Australia, Mozambique, Norway, the USSR, France, Germany and Scotland. When Watkins and the rushes arrived in Montreal in late spring of 1985, there was still no real sense of how long the film would eventually become. There was, rather, an unexamined assumption that it would be more traditional in that respect than it turned out to be. As the editing began in earnest in June of 1985, Watkins was aware of the fact that he had an unusually high amount of film that seemed usable.

Perhaps here, the collaborative planning process of the film began to exert a powerful, shaping influence in an unexpected way. With the commercial cinema, a filmmaker purchases the labor of crew and cast, thus obtaining footage which has been turned into a commodity by the process and conditions of its production. One has no obligation to use *any* footage or the contributions of any person filmed, as cash payments and contracts have already met all the obligations incurred. In this case, however, Watkins was faced with hours of film that represented the thinking and the dedicated participation of hundreds of persons in various communities around the world.

Additionally, because individual sequences *had* been locally planned, they were far from homogeneous. Views in the US and other Western bloc countries varied considerably and sometimes were in open conflict, and all these views were in tension, at least, with at least some views expressed in the Soviet Union. And views expressed in the Third World often ran counter (or at least in somewhat different directions) than those emanating from the developed world. But underneath all the footage was a not-so-surprising common voice that spoke of hopes for peace and cooperation, of the desire for common opportunities for human fulfillment. But the barriers to that fulfillment were often defined very differently, and any short film that

emphasized merely the commonness or the divergence would have falsified either the reason for hope or the complex nature of the problem of getting people to agree to act in concert.

Much of the footage Watkins had, then, seemed to make great claims on inclusion in the film, and during the nearly eighteen months of editing, the film slowly grew into its very considerable length. I will discuss the issue of how the length is related to the complexity of the film later, but by the time the film was completed in the fall of 1986, it was clear to all of us still involved in the project that our work was not over — that if the finished film did have integrity of form and content, we needed to begin to work again to find audiences for it. Certainly the commercial media, which we had side-stepped in the fundraising process, did not seem inclined to beat a path to our door, not in the United States at least, and the idea that we were dealing with a process rather than assembling and marketing a product was reaffirmed once more.

## S T R U C T U R E

The backbone of the film, indeed probably two-thirds of its very considerable length, is made up of family and group discussions, discussions about Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their aftermath, discussions about the arms race, discussions about hunger and human needs, discussions about the inequity and injustice of current political systems, discussions about the very limited way in which all of these subjects are presented by the media and various educational systems. Most of these discussions take place within families, but the film also includes larger group discussions which take place in Tahiti, France, Scotland, Mozambique, Australia and Norway.

The fact that so much of the film is built around the conventional nuclear family and the fact that many of those families have very little previous political commitment or involvement has provoked criticism from some radical critics who have argued that the film accepts and idealizes the conventional nuclear family. It seems to me that the film *does* accept the nuclear family as a basic social unit in most cultures it presents, but that while a great deal of sympathy and support is accorded to persons who appear here, the family is revealed again and again, under Watkins' questions, to have failed just as thoroughly as the educational system at bringing an awareness of humanity's collective dilemma before the young.

But what the film does do through the families and the larger discussions is to give screen space and screen time, a great deal of both, to ordinary people who are asked to think together about the failure of nations to deal with human dilemmas. That simple fact draws attention, again and again in *The Journey*, to the way in which screen space and time are generally reserved, like the first class cabin on airplanes, for persons of power and privilege—media personalities, political figures, or recognized experts of various sorts.

Beyond these grassroots discussions, the film also develops several other themes in varying ways. One of these themes is the Orwellian lunacy of civil defense plans, a theme presented primarily through enactments based on extensive research of local crisis plans in four areas: Stjordal in Norway, Morwell in Australia, Glasgow in Scotland, and Utica in New York. In Stjordal and Utica, communities



enacted the plans called for in local government documents. In Morwell, a group spent a long period of time in a fallout shelter, and in Glasgow, the Draconian nature of British crisis planning as revealed by the research of Duncan Campbell and others was played out in a series of enacted confrontations between the British population and the forces of the central government.<sup>4</sup>

The film also explores in great detail the construction of news footage, the images most people consume regularly and which stand collectively in the public mind for contemporary reality, at least contemporary political reality. The film concentrates especially on the news coverage of the so-called Saint Patrick's Day Summit of 1985, when Prime Minister Mulroney and President Reagan met in Quebec city ostensibly to discuss issues of common concern, and ended up singing "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling" together before a gala audience, providing a video image that television commentators called the "most lasting image of the entire summit."

*The Journey* sent its own film crew to the summit, but instead of turning their cameras exclusively on the politicians, they filmed the news crews and their interaction with the event. *The Journey* explored the entire process, from the media planning before the event, through the filming of "topos" before and during, to coverage of the various media moments and of various demonstrations that occurred during the visit. Further, a media watch was set up world wide, but especially centering in Canada and the US, to see what, of all the footage exposed, was actually transmitted and how that footage was presented. Thus, the summit as a media event also runs throughout the film as a kind of leitmotif revealing the media management of public opinion.

Finally, the film includes various other threads as well: a photo exhibition by an American photographer, Bob del Tredici, called "At Work in the Fields of the Bomb," footage gathered in super-8 by the White Train Monitoring Project documenting the journey of the White Train from the Pantex plant in Amarillo to the naval base at Bangor, and assorted other graphics. But a basic opposition running through all of the film is the tension between media images (shot from a television screen and different, therefore, in shape and texture from the rest of the film) and the various images proposed by the film as it constructs an alternative sense of life as the film proposes that people live, view and experience it around the world.

The opening sequence of the film illustrates its method and intent in several important ways. Particularly apparent is the deliberate, carefully restrained pace of a film which asks us to digest slowly and carefully the richly interconnected elements it presents. The film opens with a black screen and Watkins' voice, which says:

Well, hello. My name is Peter Watkins. I am English, an English filmmaker, at this time living in Sweden, and it will be my voice you will hear from time to time during *The Journey* as narrator. It is my intention to give you some additional information and also to comment on the process of the film. I do hope that you will not feel that there is anything objective about the information I'll give to you. Certainly, all of us working on *The Journey* have tried very hard with our research to make our information as accurate as possible, but I must emphasize that our presentation of the information is biased, due to our very strong feelings about the subject of this film.

Watkins' voice is followed by the voices of those who speak the voice-over translations of various participants in the film—Erna Buffie and Margarita Stocker for the English language versions of the film—as they introduce themselves.

Then Watkins introduces Bob del Tredici and his photographs, all this in the opening several minutes of running time before any images appear on screen. When del Tredici's photos do appear, this first set of eight photographs about various stages in the process of nuclear weapons production, they are shown in hand-held shots of photos on a table, while hands, presumably del Tredici's, move them, highlight elements, and point to salient features, in a manner quite unlike the distanced, impersonal, benchwork shots of the conventional, "objective" documentary.

Entering over the last of the photos is a Japanese flute which is identified as such with a title, followed by an extreme long shot of a green hill and Watkins' voice explaining how this hill is being quarried to provide gravel for a military airfield. A map, overlaid with the flute and Watkins' voice, further identifies the location of the hill in the outer Hebrides. Shots of the airfield are followed then by shots of a group of Scottish Islanders who have been protesting the airfield for five years. Their discussion is interrupted by shots of the Peace Park in Hiroshima and a woman there, Mrs. Saeki, who will provide the first testimony from the *Hibakusha*, or survivors of the bomb. But the images of the park are overlain first with the sounds of a jackhammer at work on the Scottish airfield and then with Scottish voices singing a Gaelic hymn.

The effect of this intercutting and contrapuntal use of image and sound is to infuse the sense of the Scottish airfield sequence with a sound which we will come to associate with Hiroshima, even as the Hiroshima images are overlain with Scottish sounds which remind us of the continuing arms race, and that Hiroshima is by no means an isolated and past event.

And the pattern of cutting slowly and deliberately while interweaving sounds and images in this way seems designed for reflection and to encourage us to make connections, to make links between places and events remote from each other in space and time. Indeed, this is the pattern of the whole film as well, which seeks to interweave images and sounds from all the countries it visits to create a sense of mutual influence, of common concern.

The film will eventually, for example, introduce Tahitians who are protesting French nuclear testing in the Pacific and link their concerns to those of French activists who are considering the implications of continued French colonial activities in the world, activities essentially identical to America's activities in various places and quite simply a continuation of a nuclear testing program carried on by the US in Nevada and in the Pacific. The damage to the ecosphere of these programs is linked to the industrial pollution of the Latrobe Valley in Australia, acid rain in North America and Europe, and to Chernobyl. The invasion of village life in Stornoway in the Scottish Hebrides by NATO for its airfield is linked in turn to the strict social controls central to British crisis planning and the lack of information supplied by the British Department of Defense, and this, in turn, is linked to the inadequacy of current civil defense plans in the U.S., Norway, and Germany, that inadequacy highlighted richly by the collective narrated experiences of survivors of World War II in Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union.

Each area represented in the film is identified at its first appearance on a large Mercator projection global map, an image that eventually serves as a visual link between all the areas. The film proposes as its project an attempt to overcome barriers of distance and time. The physical distance, of course, often makes the common elements in human experience difficult to see, or allows them to be buried under the distortion of nationalistic rhetoric, while the mental barriers





**The War Game**





of time allow the appropriation of memory for political ends that separate rather than connect people.

For example, at one point in the film Watkins is discussing the Scottish family with the Russian family in Leningrad. He explains that it is about 1000 km. from Leningrad to Dumbarton, or about the same distance as it is from Leningrad to the Caspian Sea in the south or to Sverdlovsk in the east, reference points that illustrate how limited our sense of distance usually is when it must reach beyond national borders. And the film suggests at this point, "the question is, how to close this distance?"

Likewise the continual intercutting of contemporary issues and the memories of World War II holocausts in Hiroshima, Hamburg and Leningrad serves to erase the comfortable sense of the remoteness and uniqueness of these events, so much so that tense distinctions are erased and Watkins' narrator says at one point as he introduces the ongoing testimony of one Hiroshima survivor that "Toshiko Saeki will lose thirteen members of her family tomorrow." Or as the narrator explains about the takeoff of the Enola Gay on Tinian, the camera pans with a plane taking off from the field of Stornoway.

Perhaps the result of such linkage is nowhere more apparent than it is in a long sequence that runs through film reels 13-16, or units seven and eight, if the film is screened in segments. This long sequence which concentrates on civil defense planning, shuttling back and forth between the enactments in Utica and Stjordal and recollections of World War II, ends with a group of Norwegian children running for a shelter, their very real vulnerability established by the narrator who explains how much Norway is at risk from the missiles of *both* sides. But, as the narrator concludes, "these can be Soviet children, can be American children, can be British children, can be French children, can be Swedish children, can be German children, can be Japanese children, can be Greek children, can be Marshall Islands children, can be Chinese children, can be Turkish children, can be Polish children." And a concluding title — "many children never came back from the forest" — drawn from the narrative of a Russian woman about her childhood evacuation from Leningrad where her parents died, links all these children to the children of World War II.

But if the film seeks to overcome these barriers of distance and time, it also confronts the forces that use such barriers to reinforce emotional and ideological separation, especially as those forces are concentrated in the broadcast media and the special collaboration that exists between the media and government, no matter how much North American broadcasters like to suggest that media/government relations are primarily adversarial. As the film suggests, there is a blockage on some level, between common sympathy and experience and collective action, a blockage evoked in Eliot's lines from "The Hollow Men" quoted in the film:

Between the idea  
And the reality  
Between the motion  
And the act  
Falls the Shadow.

As I have already suggested, the film looks at television news, from planning to broadcast, to show how images are gathered selectively and how the media are drawn to specific, public, staged events whose very existence is due solely to the presence of the media. During the film, we watch the process, from breakfast planning sessions to location shoots, to editing room directing and rehearsals, to finished product transmitted to the video screen. In Quebec City, we see the media

take their positions during demonstrations among the police, or in one telling image, inside a building, comfortably warm and apart from the demonstration which they film through a window. And the film's analysis of the Shamrock summit coverage reveals that total air time given to members of the public during the summit was 0.3%, while air time given to protesters was precisely 0%.

The film's point here is aided not a little by the media themselves and the way they converge on photo op sessions and finally on the summit gala. For them, as Peter Mansbridge of the CBC actually says on screen:

one of the big questions . . . has been not what treaties the two leaders would sign, but what would they do when they got to tonight's gala? There had been all sorts of speculations . . . Would Mulroney and Reagan sing together? Would they even dance together?

*The Journey*, then, sets out to deconstruct the visual media, to call attention not only to their devices, their discourse, to the empty spaces in that discourse, what they systematically leave out and suppress, and how an agenda is constructed out of the result that proudly proclaims and pretends to objectivity. But as the film opens a box of critical tools with which to dismantle television images, it does not neglect the fact that those tools can and must be used on itself.

For example, throughout *The Journey* when television footage is shown, assorted electronic beeps are laid over the sound track to mark and call attention to all cuts and changes in the image. Watkins is, and has for some time, been concerned over the increasingly rapid pace of television and film cutting in recent years, a phenomenon he feels militates against carefully considered assessment of the images on the screen. But occasionally, the same beeps will be used to call attention to the cuts and changes in image of the film as well. Or, some time after the use of cutaways has been explained in news footage, Watkins calls attention to a rare cutaway in *The Journey*, explaining that he used it to show the reaction of the listeners and "to condense the main scene." So, in constructing itself, *The Journey* seeks to call attention to its own manipulative devices, not to pretend that it can avoid manipulation, or will thereby become "objective," but so that, as the introduction states, we can see some of its primary agenda for what it is.

Likewise, as the film maintains its personal voice through the refusal of tripods, dollies, and benchwork apparatus in favour of hand-held, long fluid takes, it also does not seek to conceal the errors and confusion engendered during the process of shooting and editing. At one point, for example, in discussing US nuclear testing, Watkins was challenged by a family as to whether the US nuclear testing program was or was not going forward at the time. Watkins, the interviewer, hesitates in momentary confusion until Watkins, the narrator, intercedes to explain that he had suddenly realized that he didn't know at the time and needed to find out. Or on another occasion, an earlier narrator's comment about the island of Mururoa in Polynesia is corrected later and pointed out as a mistake. *The Journey* does retain, then, the traditional narrative voice of documentary, but that voice is revealed throughout to be opinionated and fallible in a way that the traditional documentary never admits, with its apparently "objective" and omniscient voice.

The result of *The Journey's* employment of these reflexive devices is not to divert attention from the referential product of the text, the subject of the film, but rather to admit simply that the whole process of writing this film is biased, limited, and fallible. And if the film does not claim the sense of omnipotence and omniscience constructed by the conventional documentary, criticism of its methods may, perhaps,



not entirely displace concern for its referential goals. Watkins would argue that such displacement is the problem with most deconstructive criticism (and I agree with him), whose highly developed method and language too often lose touch with the world the discourse pretends to be about. In *The Journey*, the intent is activism, not criticism, and the film proceeds upon the assumption that the visual text is a tool, not an isolated, solipsistic system.

Thus *The Journey* seeks to supplant, or at least supplement, the flawed, partial, and self-serving images of the commercial media with another set of images, admittedly flawed and partial, perhaps even self-serving (if self can be redefined in a larger, collective, global sense here). But this set of counter images proposed by *The Journey* expresses global and human realities systematically ignored by the discourse of the current media.

One set of such images systematically repressed is provided by Bob del Tredici's photographs of the seldom seen process of nuclear weapons production. Another is provided by the footage of the White Train, whose journeys are seldom witnessed by the public and virtually never shown in the media. Yet another is created as *The Journey* models an alternative use of video to create connections rather than to maintain political divisions.

The process of making the film involved a parallel video project of recording video introductions of various families which could then be taken round the world to be shown to other families participating in the film, in order to create for the participants a greater sense of the global discussion that each family's contribution helped to create. The most important result of this parallel project was to heighten the sense of process, both in the shooting period and the viewing period of the film. During the shooting, the video project created a process that changed the reality the film sought to document and influence, modeling precisely the sort of activism the film calls for.

The Scottish family, for example, as a result of the video contact, journeyed to Leningrad during the shooting period and met with Alexander Kolosov of the Soviet family. In an extraordinary sequence near the end of the film, the transformations in the two families are revealed dramatically as the Kolosovs are filmed watching a video of the Scottish family whom they have now partly met. All the reserve and defensive stiffness of earlier sequences disappear remarkably in the face of the human connections the filming process began and fostered. And, in fact, since the film has been completed, the two families have met again altogether, and the process continues.

The network of family discussions, enactments, and the media analysis together in *The Journey* create a very different sort of film narrative than the linear movement of conventional documentary that still tends to create its sense of movement by at least partially disconnecting its characters and events from the larger circumstances surrounding them. *The Journey* explores a present global consciousness much as *Edvard Munch*, Watkins' 1975 film on the Norwegian expressionist painter, sought to explore a personal consciousness and its context. Here, as in the earlier film, the film weaves a complex tapestry, a web of interconnectedness, where connection is the main point, and movement, if it is to occur, must be collective, and not merely personal.

The film explores the mechanisms we have created to suppress our awareness of and sympathy for the complex needs and demands of others. And it does not attempt to move us simply by making statements about connection, but by creating connections, by modelling them in the process of its own production. It explores the limitations on our collective exist-

ence and awareness, not so that we may know and despair, but so that we may act together to change. This is the real journey of the title—a journey to common concern for common human need.

Michael Nagler, in an essay called "Redefining Peace," has distinguished between what he calls negative peace and positive peace. Negative peace, as he uses the term, is simply the state of non-war. This is the usual use of the word peace. But he argues that peace may more properly be defined as the opposite of violence, and he notes that Johann Galtung, a Norwegian peace scholar, defines violence as "that which inhibits the fulfillment of a human being."<sup>5</sup> Galtung's definition is one that everywhere challenges privilege and inequality, that demands justice for all mankind. In Galtung's sense, *The Journey*, by virtue of its length, its complexity, the global scope of its vision, may be the first positive peace film we have.

## P R O S P E C T S

*The Journey* has mostly played in festivals as of this writing at the end of 1987. It has played in Berlin (Feb.), Vienna (Mar.), Sydney (June), Melbourne (July), Edinburgh (Aug.), Toronto (Sept.), Lisbon (Sept.) and Leipzig (Nov.). It has received mostly positive receptions, but some particularly negative ones, especially in Toronto and at the Robert Flaherty Film Seminar in New York this summer. The film currently has distribution in Sweden and Canada, but still is having to struggle to find distribution elsewhere. The challenge now for most of us who worked on the film is to get the film in front of audiences as best we can, both to find distributors and the best distribution and presentation methods for a film of this length. It may be that in many countries, video will have to be the principle format for the film and that schools, especially colleges will have to be the major target audience.

All this is so especially because of the problem with which I began, the film's length. A common comment one encounters about *The Journey*'s length is: "Why can't you make a peace film that is an hour long?" The easy answer is that one can—that lots of people have done so, and that there is nothing necessarily wrong with those films. But if, as I believe, the film is appropriately long (at least generally so—I suspect that every viewer of a film this long would have done a number of things differently), then it begins by challenging the structure of our lives, a structure that makes 14½ hours seem so forbidding.

Easy dismissals of the film by some reviewers seem to assume that the length is mainly a challenge to the unalterable facts of anatomy. But unless the film is seen in one or two long sessions, that need not be the case. Rather, the length challenges the way in which we choose to spend our lives, our sense of priorities and the place of film within them. Somehow, those of us working to find an audience for the film need to address the nature of audience expectation in order to get audiences to reconsider the restrictive implications of the two hour limit that we unquestionably consider normal. Indeed, virtually all of a group of college freshmen in a course that I taught this fall expressed initial dismay at the prospect of a 14½-hour film, but after viewing it over a 10-week period, they were just as overwhelmingly inclined to defend its length as both appropriate and necessary.

Another problem in finding audiences besides the length will be to set aside the elitism of a cultural establishment that shows signs of irritation over giving screen space and time to





Peter Watkins directs a dramatization for **The Journey**.

people not distinguished by the usual credentials of our society. A Toronto reviewer, Jay Scott, in *The Globe and Mail* wrote of Watkins permitting the families "to rattle on repetitiously with psychobabble accounts of their feelings and fears."<sup>6</sup> Such statements must be countered, I think, by other reactions. I found the comments of people in the film to be as various as the people themselves, sometimes narrow and shallow, sometimes defensive, sometimes manipulative, sometimes thoughtful, sometimes moving and eloquent, even as they struggled to put into words things that they had never tried to say before.

This is not to say that the decision to center the films on families like these is not without its liabilities. At times, the families seem not only to lack the information Watkins suggests they should have, but also to lack so much information that all they can reveal is lack of awareness. At some moments, then, the discussion goes dead, though the film makes clear how and why that is so.

And further, by thus limiting the scope of discussion and keeping experts off screen, the film develops certain inevitable blind spots. For example, as one of my students pointed out, the film is much clearer in revealing the extent and nature of Honeywell's participation in weapons manufacture than it is in revealing how and why it is that America dominates and controls the Mexican economy. But the film does raise such issues as important, even if they are not always richly explored, and stimulates a sense of urgency about them, so much so that this particular student researched and wrote a paper on the destructive influence of Del Monte on Mexican agriculture.<sup>7</sup>

*The Journey*, finally, challenges the base of the peace movement, which in the US at least is heavily supported by

the upper middle class and is, as a result, not necessarily a radical cause by any significant measure. By arguing that meaningful peace can only spring from radical change, from a redistribution of wealth and privilege, from a redefinition of male and female, *The Journey* also poses distribution challenges within the peace movement itself.

Finally, the challenge that *The Journey* poses for some of us film critics and teachers who worked on the film is to find new ways to relate to the cinema less as disinterested observers and more as interested participants—to recognize and accept the partisanship inherent in our usual endeavors. Traditional film criticism has helped to legitimize and justify the ideological project of the classical commercial cinema by simply accepting the product of a commercial production system. We have never developed a correspondingly systematic criticism of the production system itself.

The *Cahiers* essay on *Young Mr. Lincoln* in 1972 was an important step in pointing up the ideological direction of the classical cinema, and the last fifteen years have seen a proliferation of laudable work by radical critics on the classical and alternative cinemas. It seems to me, however, that most academic criticism still sees the cinema in terms of product, concentrating on an artifact that at most bears witness in its structure to the process of its production. And since it is still considered at least awkward, if not downright bad form, in the academy to write of a film and/or filmmakers with whom one has an admitted association, we still perpetrate and sanctify the split between the making and criticizing of films.

*The Journey* has become a challenge for me to refashion my sense of the role of the critic into one that involves and admits active participation in the process of making film (as we always are anyway, at least in brokering audiences and



reputations). To criticize product may be to judge the shape of one's world; to participate in process, however, is to work to reconstruct that world, albeit perhaps at the cost of giving up the comfortable authority of detachment.

An anecdote that I remember reading nearly 20 years ago comes to mind here as appropriate, though it is so befogged with age that it is undoubtedly inaccurate in some particulars and I have been unable, in various library searches, to rediscover and verify it. In 1968, Tom Wolfe, the New York writer who had till then been principally known for his articles in *Esquire*, published *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, an account of the adventures of Ken Kesey (author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Sometimes a Great Notion*) and his friends, the Merry Pranksters.

By all accounts, it was a somewhat odd conjunction — this group of crazy, scruffy, generally rural hippies and an urban dandy given to impeccable light suits and flashy shirts. Wolfe has admitted that, perhaps out of contrariness, he dressed up even more than usual when he was with Kesey researching the book.<sup>8</sup> At some point, however, Kesey and company were engaged in a particularly messy project, painting something as I recall, and Kesey asked Wolfe to join in and help. "But," he cautioned Wolfe, "remember that you can't paint without getting some of it on you."

I think that it was Wolfe who told the story in response to an interviewer's question about whether he managed to retain his distance from his subject, and thus his objectivity. I recollect it here now to suggest the choice I made in working with *The Journey*. The committed critic must, I think, join in the project, even at the cost of getting somewhat bespattered; but the reward is to be a part of the process of change. □

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## NOTES

1. Michael Tracey, "Censored: The War Game Story," *Nukespeak: The Media and the Bomb*. Ed. Crispin Aubrey (London: Comedia, 1982): 38-54.
2. See Joseph Gomez, *Peter Watkins* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979) 46-66. Also, James Welsh, "The Modern Apocalypse: *The War Game*," *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 11 (Spring, 1983): 25-41.
3. Peter Watkins, "The Fear of Commitment," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 11 (1983): 221-233.
4. Duncan Campbell's reports were printed in *The New Statesman* in Britain especially in 1980 and 1981.
5. Michael Nagler, "Redefining Peace" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 40 (Nov., 1984): 36-38.
6. Jay Scott, "Memorable Moments Lost in Misguided Journey: *The Globe and Mail* 12 September 1987, sec. c:5.
7. Aaron McGrath's paper was only one of many interesting responses to *The Journey* by my students.
8. Joshua Gilder, "Tom Wolfe," *Saturday Review*. April, 1981, 44.

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# IDENTIFICATION and SLAUGHTER



by Peter Benson

**T**HE CONCEPT OF 'IDENTIFICATION' with a fictional character in a film has been, for many years, a commonplace of film theory. Its familiarity in this new area has been aided by its ubiquity in film criticism, from the most elementary and gushing ("I *really* identified with her/him") to the most careful and considered. In the passage from criticism to theory, however, the term has acquired an additional layer of significance — that provided by its use and investigation within psychoanalysis.

The terms of this appropriation were established and initiated by Laura Mulvey's highly influential article 'Visual Pleasure and narrative Cinema,'<sup>1</sup> where, however, the question of identification flows as a secondary consideration from her primary focus on the spectator's relation to the image. Mulvey found the pleasure of looking (in the cinema) to be split between a scopophilic contemplation of a sexual object, and a narcissistic identification with the human image. This latter, specular identification, is modelled on the 'mirror phase' of Lacanian theory (a model given a slightly spurious pertinence by the analogy between the film screen and the mirror before which the fascinated infant finds an ego in alienation).

Thus Steve Neal,<sup>2</sup> for example, while taking issue with Mulvey, explicitly states that he will confine himself to a consideration of narcissistic identification (p. 5). This approach, quite generally adopted, has elided the fact that the patterns of identification available to the film spectator have undergone a major and ineradicable modification through the oedipal moment of subject formation. Any access (even a regressive one) to specular identification must traverse this complex.

Film theory, therefore, finds itself



with a highly developed (Lacanian) theory of pre-oedipal identification, and little consideration of Freud's discussion of oedipal and post-oedipal identifications. It is this omission I wish to rectify, in the belief that a consideration of Freud's texts, while rendering the issues more complicated, provides a solution, through this complexification, to several dilemmas that have emerged.

Not that Mulvey's article has been universally and uncritically accepted. The differing grounds for disagreement might be clarified if the central proposition of her article could be expressed in the formula:

'The spectator (male) identifies with the protagonist (male) in order to possess/look at the female character(s).'

This has been subjected to successive denials, as linguistically exhaustive as those with which Senatspräsident Schreber denied the root formula of his paranoia ('I (a man) love him').<sup>3</sup> Hence, it has been pointed out that:

- (i) the spectator in the cinema is frequently female, and has female positions of spectatorship open to her (e.g. E. Ann Kaplan 'Women and film' [Methuen 1983] — particularly her remarks on 'Lady from Shanghai')
- (ii) the main protagonist of some films is female, and a male spectator might still identify with her (e.g. Ian Green's comments on 'Gilda' in 'Malefunction' Screen Vol 25 No 4/5)
- (iii) male characters are sometimes given as objects to the viewer's scopophilic gaze (e.g. Steve Neal, *op.cit.*)
- (iv) the spectator might identify, *not* with a character, but with the film as the staging of a fantasy scenario (e.g. Elizabeth Cowie 'Fantasia' *m/f* No 9).

**M**Y INTENTION, IN CONTINUING this evidently productive process, is to enquire into the implications of 'identification with a character' as a mechanism of the psyche, assuming (for the purposes of this article) that it does, indeed, take place.

In Freud's writings, the most substantial (and certainly the longest) discussion of this concept is Chapter VII of 'Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego'.<sup>4</sup> In this chapter the developmental priority of identification over object cathexis is propounded, while at the same time the very nature of identification prepares the ground for the oedipal conflict:

'Identification is known to

psychoanalysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another person . . . . A little boy will exhibit a special interest in his father, he would like to grow like him and be like him, and *take his place* everywhere.' (my emphasis)<sup>5</sup>

The conflict *inherent* in this wish (to take someone's place, to occupy the space they themselves inhabit, is to effect their abolition) reaches an apogee with the growth of the child's object cathexis on his mother:

"The little boy notices that his father stands in his way with his mother. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile colouring and becomes identical with the wish to *replace* (i.e. take the place of) his father in regard to his mother as well. Identification, in fact, is *ambivalent from the very first*; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal.' (my emphasis and parenthesis)<sup>6</sup>

It is this ambivalence that has not been fully taken into account in the use of the concept within film theory. Yet it provides an immediate understanding of the satisfaction felt in the trials and dangers (and even physical mutilation) suffered by the object of our identification in narrative films. These assuage the hostile feelings implicit in any identificatory structure.

However, this initial identification with the parents (the fact that it takes place in relation to *both* parents being made more explicit in the later 'The Ego and the Id') provides no more than the basis on which later formations of identification become possible. These are not uniform, and Freud distinguishes a number of varieties. Once more, the possibilities for film theory are enlarged by the mapping of the viewer's identificatory structures across these differences. Thus, for example, Ian Green refers to identification with the "bit-part player, the loser, the eternal side-kick"<sup>7</sup> as if this were an *alternative* to identification with the hero. Yet this would be an ego-identification which might exist simultaneously with the viewer's super-ego finding its ego-ideal in the hero.

It is, indeed, the conflict resulting from parental identification which splits the ego, precipitating the formation of the super-ego. Any future identification then has differing effects according to "whether the object is put in the place of the ego or of the ego-ideal."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, this initial split demonstrates that a splitting of the unity of the ego is *always* a potential consequence of identification. Multiple simultaneous identifications are possible, and Freud speculated that, if these became cut off from

one another by repression, the pathological condition of 'multiple personality' results.<sup>9</sup>

While making this principal distinction between ego-identification and super-ego -identification, Freud also distinguishes three different forms of ego-identification.<sup>10</sup> These are as follows:

- (A) Identification with the object one wishes to replace (whose place one wishes to take) with respect to a loved being. This is characterized as *hostile*.
- (B) Identification by *regression* (identification being an earlier form of attachment than object cathexis) with the loved being itself.
- (C) Identification with someone because of a desire to be in a *similar* situation — not to *replace* them, but to duplicate the scenario in which they are caught.

(Incidentally, if the third of these appears to be the least neurotic, it should be remarked that Freud's example concerns the communication of hysteria among the pupils of a girls' school.)

None of these is equivalent to the narcissistic identification invoked by Lacanian theorists. The regressive identification in (B) is *consequent* on an object desire which creates and sustains it. In the example Freud gives (from the case of 'Dora') Dora's desire for her father is repressed (because forbidden) through the mechanism of an identification with him. Such a mechanism could only bind a male spectator to his male surrogate on the screen if there were a repression of homosexual desire involved (which may well be the case in film viewing, but this certainly renders the issues more complex than has been generally acknowledged). In its non-neurotic form, the prior desire need not be subjected to a total repression in order for part of the libido invested in it to revert to an identificatory form of attachment. Far from this process necessarily producing a conflict, human love is invariably sustained by some degree of identification with its object. In other words, the polarity 'identification/object desire' is by no means as absolute as the formula of Mulvey's original thesis would suggest. A narratively central, desirable woman in a film is quite capable of being an object of identification for a heterosexual male viewer, in part *because of*, rather than in opposition to, her desirability.

The differential trajectories of these diverse identifications in a particular film (acknowledging that they may exist





simultaneously with respect to the same character) provide a means towards understanding the pleasures offered, and the grip in which the audience is (willingly) contained. Such an analysis could, admittedly, be applied to *any* narrative, and the specificity of the *film* medium would not have the centrality that Lacanian theorists have sought to give it. For Metz and Baudry, however, who have given the most careful accounts of the analogies between the position of the film viewer and the infant at the mirror stage,<sup>11</sup> it is the exacerbation of the visual sense as such (and the consequent "identification of the spectator with his own look"<sup>12</sup>) which maintains this connection, this fascination, and would thus apply even if the images were of landscapes and objects rather than people ('La Région Centrale' rather than 'La Ronde'). To consider film as a *narrative* visual art is to admit the insistence of each of these two components, even as we trace the seam where they join. It is the compulsion of storytelling which stamps on each image its necessity (of information and relevance).

**M**ULVEY EXEMPLIFIED her account of identification and vision through a discussion of *Vertigo*. It will therefore not be inappropriate to displace these concerns (meaning, not to *replace*, but to sketch the limits of their placing) through a consideration of *Psycho* (which will be useful here, also, because of its enormous familiarity).

At the beginning of the film, Marion Crane is given to our gaze (half-undressed) in a voyeuristic peeping under closed blinds. What is more, she is in the company of a man who, on Mulvey's thesis, would act as "bearer of the look of the spectator,"<sup>13</sup> taking it behind the passable barrier of the venetian blinds, *and* beyond the impassable barrier of the screen itself. Sam would be the narcissistic identification figure for the male viewer. He would carry the narrative, "make things happen and control events."<sup>14</sup> In fact, however, following this scene Sam is entirely absent from the narrative for a significant length of time (which is also a length of significant time). His/our look at Marion is relayed through a progressive and nonrepeating series of other male gazes (Cassidy; her boss; the cop with the shades; the car salesman). This succession of replacements ends with the bulging eye of Norman Bates placed to the peep-hole through which he/we once again watch Marion get undressed.



If there is, here, an identification with the gaze of a character, it is a gaze which is *entirely* detachable, capable of being passed, like a relay baton, from one character to another. And, we should remember, it is only the gaze as *detachable* entity (the gaze *cut off*, not *castrating* but *castrated*) that allows it to function in the space of desire (as *objet petit a* in Lacan's formula).<sup>15</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this 'floating' status of scopic identification through this part of the film, there is available a further figure of identification — Marion herself. It has often been said (notably by Robin Wood<sup>16</sup>) that we identify with Marion in the early part of the story, and that the film is constructed to produce this identification. She is, in particular, (i) the only permanent feature in the successive loci through which the narrative moves us (she thus becomes familiar). (ii) She it is who *guides* the narrative through these loci — her actions, choices, and will take us where she wants to go (placing her in what would be the male position of Mulvey's thesis). (iii) Her motivations at each stage of this journey are clear and understandable (we know *why* she steals the money, unlike Marnie in Hitchcock's later film; we are shown that her tiredness causes her to turn into the Bates' motel).

So far, these are simply the principles of a conventional criticism — a criticism caught up in the network of the drama: of psychology as plenitude answering to a unified viewer. We must, further, enquire into what *form* this identification takes among the options opened by Freud's discussion.

Clearly, Marion is not an *object for super-ego identification*. Her actions are understandable, but neither laudable nor idealizable.

We are left, if scopic identification cannot account (either in Mulvey's or Lacan's version) for the identificatory experience described in accounts of the film, with the three forms of ego-identification outlined above. The first of these does not seem appropriate. Even from a heterosexual female (or a homosexual male) viewing position, Sam is too fleeting a presence in the film to be constituted as an object of desire (even though he does appear without his shirt). Male heterosexual identification by regression with the attractive Marion may well be a contributory factor (to which we shall return). But the central mechanism would seem to lie in the scenario itself (i.e. identification C in my account). Marion has a lover (wouldn't we all like that?) and has the courage to





steal a substantial sum of money (wouldn't we all like to do that?) in order to be united with him.

The viewer's scopic identification has been caught up in a serial succession of gazes; his/her ego-identification has been fixed to Marion; and his/her super-ego has been lulled to sleep so that we might blissfully accompany Marion in her transgressions (illicit sex and theft).

The super-ego slumbers for a while behind the veil of unconsciousness, but can never be totally inactive; eventually its advancing shadow can be seen emerging behind this veil of the shower curtain which is torn aside so that vengeance may be wreaked on the defenceless ego (Marion).

At this point there are certain difficulties in deciding *with whom* the viewer's super-ego is identified. Theoretically, it would appear to be identified with Mrs. Bates. In practice, almost every viewer of the film today

knows that there 'really' is no Mrs. Bates, and 'her' character is conflated with Norman. As with many famous films (and an even larger number of famous novels) it is no longer possible to follow this narrative for the first time: even an initial reading is already a re-reading, filtered through remembered remarks, guided by anticipation. Tempting as it is to consider the organization of the text 'outside' these considerations, we must be alert to the fact that a text *has* no 'outside,' and becomes a text (as opposed to a pile of celluloid) only in and through its reading. Moreover, what remains remarkable with this particular film, and thus solicits our explanation, is the extent to which it has retained its fascination even for those for whom its story holds no surprises.

Norman/Mrs Bates occupies the position of the super-ego. The murder as punishment for transgression is another familiar theme in critical

accounts of the film. It has also been recognized that punishment is inflicted on the *audience*, through the 'shock' effect of the murder, and through the removal of our object of ego-identification. Nevertheless, this must involve some degree of satisfaction, some quantity of pleasure, if this 'entertainment' film is not to be an impossibly unpleasant experience, if it is to be (as its continuing popularity attests) 'enjoyable.'

It is indeed the case that self punishment of the ego by the super-ego satisfies a need within the psychic economy. Yet in ordinary life this satisfaction would remain unconscious, and our *conscious* experience would be of depression and melancholy (of, in particular, Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia'<sup>17</sup>). The economy of the film must be so organized that his satisfaction may enter the realm of pre-conscious awareness. This is achieved through supplementation of its force by





the hostile component of identification.

All identification, according to Freud, is ambivalent. Had our identification with Marion been according to schema (A) (for which hostility is a barely concealed source) her removal would have provided satisfaction even if it were not a punishment. Since, however, the identification is composed of the less overtly hostile schemes (B) and (C), aggression against her can only be felt with pleasure through its association with the working of a super-ego substitute.

Only by combining the aggressive component of ego-identification with the drive to punishment from the super-ego, is the film able to preserve its economy of pleasure. Indeed, the actual moment of the murder requires the reactivation of identification mechanism (C) (since we have now travelled some distance from Marion's, unobserved, sexual gratification, and her act of theft) through the intensely evoked pleasure she experiences under the shower. At the same time, the erotic nature of this totally enveloping bodily pleasure is sufficient to rouse the aggressive energies of the super-ego.

In my view, a study that limited itself to scopophilic narcissistic identification could not fully account for the economy of pleasure operative in this first part of the film. Since my primary concern is not with an analysis of 'Psycho' as such, I will not proceed to a discussion of the remainder of the film (which clearly must set up a new but related economy, following the rupture over which the terms of the narrative have changed). Rather, I will stop the film at this point, freeze it on this scene: the murder of Marion.

**I**N 1919 FREUD PUBLISHED a paper in which he considered the structure of a phantasy he found to be common amongst his patients, and which they expressed in the terms "a child is being beaten."<sup>18</sup> Most readers of the paper today would probably find this an unusual phantasy, heritage of a different era of child upbringing, its frequency a mark of the cultural difference between Freud's patients and ourselves. (None of which lessens the importance of the revelation of the mechanisms of phantasy which it occasioned.)

In the public phantasies of cinema, particularly in the era since 'Psycho,' we find another recurring scenario (across an extremely diverse collection of horror films and thrillers of various kinds) which could be expressed as "a woman is being murdered" (with the murder sometimes commuted to rape or

assault). The prevalence of this phantasy has long been recognized by feminist writers, and sometimes reversed by film makers wishing to disguise its pull (a woman, in revenge, murders men).<sup>19</sup>

The implication of the analysis I have sketched is that the object of such violent hostility is quite likely to be simultaneously an object of identification. **Indeed, the clear separation between hostile and affectionate impulses is a relatively late feature of psychic development, and is never definitive.** At the oral level of the psychic structure, loving desire is indistinguishable from the wish to tear apart and consume.

**Without this association, a thriller couldn't thrill.** The extremity of the violence is proportionate to the degree of identification it replaces. In contemporary cinema, women are marked (marked with a knife) as the prime focus of this generally unacknowledged identification.

**Clearly these remarks do not seek to condone, still less to celebrate, this appalling catalogue of fictional atrocities.** Equally clearly, mere condemnation has very little effect when the condemned product remains profitable - when there is no change in the economies (of finance and pleasure) into which it enters. Condemnation cleaves to repression as a means of resolving disturbance. And we know, from psychoanalysis, that such a resolution will be illusory.

It is more relevant, and of more use, to articulate that which strives to be spoken within the obliteration of murder and its repetition from film to film. As Freud reminds us: "Almost everywhere there can be found striking omissions, disturbing repetitions, palpable contradictions, signs of things the communication of which was never intended. The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder."<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the fictional murder of women can be read as a distorted text whose significance we may uncover. I would like to suggest two levels of meaning haunting these movies: first, their mode of action in the psyche of the individual viewer; and, secondly, their place within the cultural juncture which has produced them. In the movement from the first of these levels (a conservative *reflection* of psychic contradiction) to the second (an announcement of the effective action of that contradiction towards social change), my remarks will inevitably become increasingly speculative, spoken

from within, and as part of, the very turmoil they seek to understand. In such a context, neutrality will be as impossible as assurance.

Beginning, however, from what we know of the construction of gender, the central and most radical trend in psychoanalytic thought assumes that there is no *biological* basis for the differences in character between the sexes. It is through the very mechanism we have been considering, identification (at the oedipal moment), that social gender is established. Consequently, since every child experiences periods of identification with both male and female figures in its environment, our gender is never fixed and definitive. What *is* fixed, by our culture (the culture to which the oedipal drama provides access) is the significance of the binary polarity male/female. Inevitably, therefore, every choice of gender position (and I am obviously not claiming the existence of a *voluntary* choice, of a choice effected by the will) involves that sense of exile beautifully evoked in the joke quoted by Lacan in 'The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious':

"A train arrives at a station. A little boy and a little girl, brother and sister, are seated in a compartment face to face next to the window through which the building along the station platform can be seen passing as the train pulls to a stop. 'Look,' says the brother, 'we're at Ladies!'. 'Idiot!' replies his sister, 'can't you see we're at Gentlemen.' . . . for these children," comments Lacan, "Ladies and Gentlemen will be henceforth two countries towards which each of their souls will be more impossible since they are actually the same country and neither can compromise on its own superiority without detracting from the glory of the other."<sup>21</sup>

It is the girl, you will note, who believes herself to be stranded in the country of men, and is therefore indignant at her brother's foolish error. (She is a feminist!) But the boy is adrift to exactly the same degree; only the fact that he speaks first lessens the occasion for indignation on his part.

When Laura Mulvey considered the female spectator of films which have a central controlling hero figure, she concluded that "Hollywood genre films structured around masculine pleasure, offering an identification with the *active* point of view, allow a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity."<sup>22</sup> This was a part of their yield of pleasure for a woman viewer. The type of film I am now considering



does not have a male hero who is in control of the action. These films address themselves, rather, to the lost aspects of *male* sexual identity. It is the desire of an exile for the mother-land (in which he is, nonetheless, still living) which drives the male character to violence and violation. Norman Bates, in particular, can only oscillate destructively between being a man (Norman) and being a woman (Mrs. Bates).

A male viewer of a film in which a woman is threatened identifies his ego with her. Thereby, he is relieved of the burden of his sexual identity, and the result is thrilling (a thrill both supplemented and masked by the thrill of fear from the vicariously experienced danger). The situation is similar to that of heterosexual love, which is more thrilling than mere sexual desire because of the degree of identification with its object that it involves.

The female viewer, however, identifies simply with a girl in danger. Her gender position is not directly challenged, and the thrill has a single dimension. In this, the predominance of men in the production of films is no doubt the controlling factor. Nevertheless, there is a further, cultural, level to these dramas which imposes its necessity through these satisfactions.

Robin Wood's discussion of *Psycho* contains the unusual description of Marion's movements under the shower as having "an almost *ritualistic* quality."<sup>23</sup> Norman's arrival completes this ritual for which she has unknowingly been preparing herself. It is this gruesome rite to which cinema has persistently returned.

In Freud's *Totem and Taboo* we find the description of an equally brutal murder, but of a dominant *male* figure, presented as the founding moment of our (patriarchal) society.<sup>24</sup> Whether this event actually happened (and what it would mean for an origin and foundation of society to have 'actually happened') remains largely irrelevant to this discussion. The categories through which the world is discerned are formed in fiction as much as through ritual enactment, and in their confluence: as fictional rituals, such as those we find in the cinema.

The band of brothers who, in Freud's fable, murdered the primal father were driven by the desire to possess his privileges and power. Their dismemberment and consumption of the father's corpse produced a mutual identification between the brothers on which sociality was founded. Simultaneously, the sense of guilt for the murder, and the fact that

they could not *each* possess absolute power, led to a renunciation of their personal desires. At this point, Freud tells us, the possibility of matriarchy was opened, only to be replaced (we are not told exactly why) by the patriarchal organization which has survived to the present day. It is unnecessary, here, to sketch the many circumstances (such as the control of fertility, and the incorporation of woman into the capitalist work-force) which render this organization no longer either necessary or desirable.

With the crumbling of patriarchy, it is the power and privileges of women which we now (unconsciously) recognized as desirable, as an alternative to a power which has become obsolete. While this desire remains unconscious, it is subject to the primary processes, which allow it to be manifested in violence. Driven by the infantile magnitude of resentment and loss, the male repeats the primal murder, but with a *woman* now as victim.

The results of that original murder, as described by Freud, were paradoxical. It was a desire for absolute power which impelled the brothers, but the consequence of their act was the permanent abolition of any *absolute* position of power from society. A similar paradox attends the present juncture in history since femininity is a character structure which can be produced only at a distance from the centres of social power, and thus can never assume authority without itself being transformed. The mere incorporation of women into those centres has no effect on the social structure (as the situation of Britain under its current Prime Minister can testify). When it is invested as a site of resistance, femininity cannot but disintegrate with the collapse of the order it contests.

In the meantime, only the release of male desire for femininity from entrapment in the processes of the unconscious, where it festers into rage, can mollify the savagery of the cinema, which remains a *symptom* of approaching changes in the social order. It is in the *divisions* of identification, rather than in their unity (as a *single* mechanism) that these contradictions and sea-changes can be most vividly recognized

in the limited field of the cinema. Here, in the split subjectivity of the film viewer, the echoes of the future begin to distribute themselves among the myths of our present. □

## FOOTNOTES

1. Screen Vol 16 No 3
2. Steve Neal 'Masculinity as Spectacle' Screen Vol 24 No 6
3. S. Freud 'Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia' SE XII (All references to Freud will be to the Standard Edition (Hogarth Press) by Volume and page numbers).
4. Freud SE XVIII
5. *ibid* p. 105.
6. *ibid* p. 105.
7. *op cit* p. 43.
8. Freud 'Group Psychology . . .' SE XVIII p. 114.
9. Freud 'The Ego and The Id' SE XIX p. 31.
10. These are given in Chapter VII of 'Group Psychology . . .'
11. Jean-Louis Baudry 'The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' Film Quarterly Winter 74/75; Christian Metz 'The Imaginary Signifier' Screen Vol 16 No 2.
12. Metz *op cit* p. 58.
13. Mulvey *op cit* p. 12.
14. *ibid* p. 12.
15. "The *objet a* is something from which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as an organ . . . It must, therefore, be an object that is, first, separable and, secondly, that has some relation to the lack." J. Lacan 'The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis' (Penguin 1979) p. 103.
16. Robin Wood 'Hitchcock's Films' (Zwemmer 1965) p. 115.
17. Freud SE XIV.
18. Freud 'A Child is Being Beaten' SE XVII. This paper provides much of the basis for the account of phantasy developed by Laplanche and Pontalis which Elizabeth Cowie has put to work in the cinematic field (see Cowie *op cit*).
19. Reversal being a principal form of disguise for repressed material.
20. Freud 'Moses and Monotheism' SE XXIII p. 43.
21. J. Lacan 'Ecrits' (Sheridan translation. Tavistock 1977) p. 152.
22. Mulvey 'Afterthoughts on "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Inspired by "Duel in the Sun" (Framework 15/16/17 1981) p. 13.
23. Wood *op cit* p. 118 (my emphasis).
24. Freud SE XIII pp. 141-143.

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see page 11**



# CHARLIE IS A SHE:

## Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* and the Female Spectacle of Vietnam

by Krista Walter

The past is an alien country which stimulates us into imperializing it, but who is the master here has not exactly been resolved.

— A WELL-KNOWN SCHOLAR

**T**HE STORY IS A FAMILIAR ONE. THE RETURN of the repressed. Many people think that the United States lost the Vietnam War. Some say it was unwinnable. Others say we won. Like the United States military's endless struggle to document and confirm "kills" — which the Viet Cong persistently undermined by always dragging away their dead — Americans are still struggling to confirm what "really" happened over there. To confirm, or to firmly deny, the death of something like our national identity. And so the war in Vietnam has resurged, only now it is being fought on the battlegrounds of the media, of the Hollywood myth-making industry, and of the academy. We document the lives of individual soldiers and veterans, make blood and guts movies, write histories, write stories, write essays about films, metaphorize, analyze. What we academics share in common with the popular electronic media is a tendency to relegate the Vietnam War to a place in our cultural mythology which allows us to "understand" it. We study it. It becomes an object of study, a distant spectacle. The problem is not so much that we do these things (what else can we do?), but that we are caught in a contradiction because often even our scholarly methods of piecing together and fabricating an "understanding" of the war becomes a way of excluding ourselves from it. As the contributors to the Vietnam issues of *Cultural Critique* and *Wide Angle* have pointed out, our representations of the Vietnam war in humanistic, existential, or mythological terms, our mapping of literary and filmic conventions onto its documents — in short, the ways in which we rewrite its most basic script, enable us somehow on some score to win this bloody war.

I'm not suggesting that this script we actively rewrite is some kind of empirical "reality" or "true" history of this ongoing war on Vietnam, for we who stayed home have always only known it as spectacular text and image. Rather, this unwritten script we struggle to repress, if I can wager such a generalization, is made up of unresolved contradictions inherent in America's past and present barbarous interventions in, to mention a few places, Indochina, the Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iran, Afghanistan, Libya, Chile, Angola, Panama, Guatemala, the DR, El Salvador, Grenada, Nicaragua, etc. I'm not only talking about the brute facts of US aggression,

although clearly there are massive campaigns to suppress such facts. I'm also talking about how such campaigns succeed, about our nation's conception of itself as an omnipotent State/Self opposed to all others, particularly those incestuous Others known as Communism in the Third World. I'm talking about ideological perspectives ranging from racist hysteria about "pinkos" and "reds" to mass-phobias of elusive body invaders and deceptive antibodies. I'm talking about technology fetishism, compulsive consumerism, clean and perfect yuppyism — all with which we are intimately familiar and all of which might be shown to serve the United States' war machine in its current manoeuvres to make the world safe for democracy. So, the question I would ask today is not, what really happened in Vietnam?, but, what is happening to Vietnam in the United States now?

One answer has to do with the one -ism that has always asserted itself most insistently in and through the military machine and our culture in general: sexism. Sexism is not only in the everyday sense of the subjugation of women and the exclusion of women from history, but also that insidious sexism which takes seriously the Freudian metaphor of "female" as the other, dark continent and deploys it as a basis for organizing libidinal economies in our culture. While its dimensions have undoubtedly changed with the media's increasing capacity to inseminate everything, the old phallographic order is still sturdily intact, even in this postmodern age of processed androgyny. Such anachronistic notions as sexual difference and castration anxiety continue to penetrate our perceptions of and involvement in the Third World.

Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* shows us just how integral is the ideology of the primacy of the male organ to our understanding of Vietnam, and to our desire to re-tell the war's story in familiar psychosexual images and so perhaps to regain what we are afraid we lost. While deploying all of the conventions of the male-dominated cinematic apparatus to play off of our ideology of sexual difference — woman as other, other as woman — Kubrick spends the first 30 minutes of this film detailing the calculated construction of the American subject (who is, of course, always male). The "American" in which this subject comes into being is in essence the military training camp, coterminous with the nation itself. (By the way, *Full Metal Jacket* is based on Gustav Hasford's novel, *The Short-Timers*, which I will occasionally quote in addition to lines from the film.) Joker, our infrequent and unreliable narrator, describes this place: Parris Island, South Carolina, the United States Marine Corp Recruit Depot, "an eight-week college for the phony-tough and the crazy-brave, constructed in a swamp on an island, symmetrical but sinister like a suburban death camp" (Hasford, 3). It is here that





Stanley Kubrick's **Full Metal Jacket**.

Kubrick graphically depicts the systematic re-education and reconstruction, of the American male identity. The paradox of this construction, as Laura Mulvey has made clear, is that it requires the exclusion of women while at the same time it depends entirely upon the image of castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world (*Film Theory*, 803). It is woman's apparent "lack" that "produces the phallus as a symbolic presence," yet her lack also introduces the threat of castration, even though she herself lacks the powerful presence to actually carry through with such a bloody deed. It is her difference that excludes her, and her threatening difference that requires her exclusion.

In the simulated world of *Full Metal Jacket* (filmed on location in England) the construction of the subject begins with the necessary destruction of his old identity. Personal history, personality, physique — all are dismantled in short order. Gunnery Sergeant Hartman's first tactic is to rename each man: Gomer Pyle, Snowball, Cowboy, Joker, collectively known as "scumbags," "maggots," and most often, "ladies." Not endearing nicknames, but the opposite: terms of negation — not personalities, not humans, and not men. Sergeant Hartman's granite features solidify as he shouts:

You little scumbag. I got your *name*. I got your *ass*. If you ladies leave my island, if you survive recruit training, you will be a weapon, you will be a minister of death, praying for war. Until that day you are pukes, you are scumbags, you are not even human fucking beings. You are disorganized, grabastic pieces of amphibian shit.

They are nonhumans; they are "ladies." To spell it out, they are feminine since they have not yet been issued identities. The conspicuous absence of women from the base and from the war that begins here is made up for by the drill sergeant through his feminization of the men. During the first minutes of the film the viewer might identify with these all-American "oat-fed" boys and find this kind of talk amusing. But the Sergeant means unequivocally what he says. Marines are not allowed to have anything that is not issued to them — including names, genders, and thoughts. Marines are not even allowed to die without permission. Those who survive this obstacle course will indeed become weapons. Those who don't will be shattered weapons.

This important transformation from feminine-gendered amphibian shit to minister of death occurs once the male self has been broken down, fragmented into so-called "instincts" to kill, to fuck, to obey, then reinvested piecemeal into US military weapon technology. This process is an almost seamless one of simultaneous destruction and construction. While they are brutally beaten with calculated regularity and forced to capitulate at random without reason, they are assigned dominant positions in which they must command, threaten, and beat each other. While each is denied the masculine identity he came in with, figuratively castrated at every turn, each is also empowered with a super-phallus — the M-14, and a new killer instinct to go along with it.

Sergeant Hartman leads the recruits around the squad bay with their penises in their left hands and their weapons in



their right hands, singing: *This is my rifle, this is my gun. One is for fighting and one is for fun and I don't want no teen-age queen; all I want is my M-14.* In this scene the contradictory nature of this process fully emerges, for the weapon becomes equivalent to both penis and female. One substitutes for the other. To complete this transfiguration, the sergeant orders the men to name their rifles. He tells them, "this is the only pussy you people are going to get. Your days of finger-banging ol' Mary Jane Rotten-crotch through her pretty pink panties are over. You're married to *this* piece, this weapon of iron and wood, and you *will* be faithful." The prescribed relationship between a soldier and his rifle is clear enough; the recruits are even made to sleep with their weapons. It soon becomes clear that they are meant to "fuck" the enemy, as well.

A rifle is a marine's life, according to the rifleman's creed. It carries with it all the pre-packaged attributes issued to a killer marine: mechanical reflexes, speed, potency, omnipotency, yet it is also symbolically vaginal, loyal, devoted, owned and cared for by its master. It is an object of terror and love.

Leonard, alias Gomer Pyle, is the one marine who doesn't make it out of boot camp. In the process of destroying/constructing a hard man out of Leonard something snaps. He begins to talk to his rifle, Charlene. Charlene talks back. Hasford develops this scene further than does Kubrick, so I defer to a passage from the novel here. Joker discovers Leonard hugging his rifle, saying,

"Okay, Okay. I love you! . . . I've given you the best months of my life." Leonard begins to field-strip his weapon. "This is the first time I've ever seen her naked." He pulls off the blindfold. His fingers continue to break down the rifle into components. Then, gently, he fondles each piece. "Just look at that pretty trigger guard. Have you ever seen such a beautiful piece of metal?" He starts snapping steel components back together.

While this is happening Joker thinks to himself,

I think about Vanessa, my girl back home. We're on a river bank, wrapped in an old sleeping bag, and I'm fucking her eyes out. But my favorite fantasy has gone stale. Thinking about Vanessa's thighs, her dark nipples, her full lips doesn't give me a hard-on anymore. I guess it must be the saltpeter in our food, like they say.

Leonard reaches under his pillow and comes out with a loaded magazine. Gently, he inserts the metal magazine into his weapon, into Charlene.

It seems that Leonard has taken his marine corp-issued persona to heart, and so naturally he has fallen in love with his female counterpart — his solid instrument of death. Joker is still in the process of cathecting his weapon in place of Vanessa. We can see, however, that Leonard himself is a defective instrument for the power which now flows through him, although in truth he is only slightly more gullible, only slightly more manic than his fellow recruits. That is, he just jumps the gun and goes psycho too soon. He and Charlene team up to shoot the sergeant through the chest. Then he blows the back of his own head off.

Seconds after this scene, the camera focuses squarely on the leather-bound ass of a Vietnamese woman crossing a street in Da Nang to the tune of Nancy Sinatra singing "These Boots are Made For Walking." She is headed toward Joker and his sidekick, Rafterman. Typical of most American films about the Vietnam war, the Vietnamese — whether VC, NVA, South Vietnam Army Regular, or civilian — rarely appear on screen in *Full Metal Jacket*. But this is one of three instances in which one of "them" takes the screen; each time

she is a woman. The first two women are prostitutes who transact the usual business with the soldiers, but there is something disturbingly ambiguous about them. As Joker tells Rafterman, all the whores are either VC or have tuberculosis. In *Full Metal Jacket* the Vietnamese are almost exclusively represented by the mysterious Asian Woman-child who offers American-style sex, but who also offers the possibility of death.

Vietnam, like the rest of the Third World, is represented here as decidedly feminine — as sexy, as ambiguous, as dangerous. Vietnam still is, in the American ideological construct, that necessarily excluded Other who is actually the lynchpin of the whole system, America's object of desire and abhorrence. The Viet Cong understood the psychosexual foundations of the US war machine, and so they fought their enemy where he lived: in a confused and contradictory web of desire. Herman Rappaport describes the strategies the Viet Cong used to frustrate and terrorize American forces in his essay, "Vietnam: The Thousand Plateaus:"

Like the Balinese mother who . . . sexually stimulates her child only in order to reject him, to give him a firm slap of disapproval, the Viet Cong similarly stimulated the schizo from America, and not only with whores, but with the lure of its own body, its own corps: the lure of military 'engagement.' But just as the schizo expects gratification, he finds mommy absent. The trail is cold, and the 'other' has disappeared without a sound. (143).

The strategies of the Viet Cong worked because the American GI is first and foremost a male desiring machine (made in the USA). Kubrick's strategy is to lure the viewer into a similar position, then to undermine our expectations of a war film. Conventionally, the American forces must accomplish a mission of some sort or another. America is always on a mission. But in *Full Metal Jacket* there is no mission. The platoon is simply lost somewhere outside the Forbidden City. Somewhere nearby a sniper is poised and waiting. In this last scene Victor Charlie lures the platoon one by one into a trap. The sniper does this by skillfully shooting one marine first in the leg, the arm, the foot, the genitals, taking him down but allowing him to live long enough to moan and pray in agony, and thus to lure one of his buddies into target range to rescue him. The sniper's seduction, like the Balinese mother's, works perfectly on the GI psyche, not only because it is unbearable for him to watch his fellow man repeatedly castrated by some distant assailant, but also because it infuriates him that the enemy would do such an inhuman, unamerican thing as fragging a guy piece by piece rather than just blowing him away. His blind and loyal fury brings Doc, the platoon's corpsman, directly under the sniper's gaze. Once Doc is hit, Animal Mother is taken with the same rabid fervor.

During this scene the camera has shifted twice to the sniper's perspective — looking down the barrel of an SKS carbine aimed first at Alice, then at Doc. Then, as half the platoon moves in, and stops behind the wall to decide their strategy, the camera eye is once again the sniper's, only this time the gun is aimed through the hole at Cowboy's back. These three moments force the spectator to see through the eyes of the enemy. How does it feel? Confusing? Contradictory? Our identification with the GIs is increased because we can see just how vulnerable they are, while at the same time we are forced to make certain assumptions about this "other" whose keen eyes we are looking through, this other who'd shoot a cowboy in the back.

Joker is the first to locate the sniper. When she turns around to face the male viewer, Joker sees that "she is a child, no more than fifteen years old, a slender Eurasian





**Full Metal Jacket:** The sniper scene.

angel with dark, beautiful eyes, which, at the same time, are the hard eyes of a grunt" (Hasford, 116). **This surprising revelation exposes to the viewer the contradiction in his or her expectations. We did not expect a female, and yet the enemy has consistently been prefigured as woman.** These thwarted expectations are the essence of ideology, the map which precedes the territory. At this point the other two scenes with the prostitutes are brought to fruition in the film's economy, and **we realize we have been had by our own ideology of the other.**

At this moment the sniper turns a piece of the marine's own fetishized technology on him and fires; her face is that of a killer, her eyes say "death." Joker sees in her the American double — the VC grunt — who is doubly othered as female. She is everything that the GI is not and everything he fears: the symbol and perpetrator of castration. And yet Joker also sees himself reflected in her, for she is a hard grunt, harder, rather. The boundary between self and other erected within the American GI threatens to disappear or at least to transmogrify into something else in the slow-motion instant in which Joker — utterly terrified and shocked at this discovery — actually drops his precious gun. But an instant later Rafterman shoots her. She becomes his first confirmed kill, his initiation into manhood. He loses his GI virginity — to the sniper it would seem — but he kisses his rifle, calling himself a life *taker*, a heart *breaker*. But it is Joker who finally takes the sniper's life; the others are content to leave her to a slow death. The camera closes in, alternating between her terrified face and his; they are sharing a kind of intimacy, both breathing hard and fast, as she repeatedly says "shoot me" until they reach a sort of climax, and he does her.

Admittedly, *Full Metal Jacket* doesn't do what the much liberal instincts I have want it to do: to bring the American war machine to its knees, so to speak, to expose the self-destructiveness of America's identity, to break down the constructed male psyche. Kubrick allows me no such gratification; the trail is still cold. Neither does he retrieve for us our losses in and of Vietnam, nor unify what we are forced to see here as our inherently divided, desperately masculine ideology.

Here in *Full Metal Jacket* there are no tears, no salutes, and no swelling orchestration, as there are at the end of *Platoon*. On the contrary, as this Vietnam story comes to a close, Joker, Animal Mother, Rafterman, and the rest of the survivors exhibit all the signs of complete gratification. In the final scene they are singing the Mickey Mouse show theme song while they march happily back to base camp to erect nipple wet dreams of Mary Jane Rottencrotch at the Homecoming Ball. Thus we see that their experiences of mutilation and death are after all still thoroughly mediated by the TV screen of American ideology. And so are ours. Like any good American, Kubrick's marines have assimilated the happy contradictory consciousness of our Disneyland culture — pre-packaged consciousness for a simulated American. A culture wherein all your male fantasies can come true. We are a nation of cheerful and deadly mouseketeers — and we know who the leader of the club is. And it's a small Third World after all. □

*This is a revised version of a paper presented at the 'Vietnam' session of 'Subversion: Strategies of Critique,' a symposium sponsored by the graduate program of Social and Political Thought at York University. March 11-13, 1988.*



# STANDARD HOLLYWOOD FARE: The World War II Combat Film Revisited

by Peter Rist

*The contents of the following article are substantially those of a paper read at the conference, "The War Film: Contexts and Images," held at The William Joiner Center for the Study of War and Social Consequences, University of Massachusetts at Boston, March 24-28, 1988. A postscript will reflect on the paper in the context of the conference.*

**T**HIS ARTICLE ATTEMPTS TO DEMONSTRATE that *Platoon* (1986), directed by Oliver Stone, is not the film that it is generally regarded as being — i.e., a powerful anti-war document, which tells the "truth" about Vietnam. Rather, I argue that *Platoon* is limited by its proximity to the genre of the World War II (WWII) Combat film as defined by Janine Basinger, Kathryn Kane and others. Like all Hollywood genres, the Combat film seeks to entertain its audience, and, it is apparent to me that Oliver Stone, writer as well as director of *Platoon*, was secure all along in

his conviction that people were ready to see his film. I speculate that he had noticed effective ingredients at work in Combat films of the past, specifically those set in the Asian Pacific region of WWII and the Korean conflict, and deliberately included them. On the other hand, Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* strays far from generic conventions, in particular denying the audience a close identification with any of the characters and thus resisting the practice of the more critical Hollywood Combat films of "having it both ways for the audience" in Janine Basinger's words — i.e., criticizing some aspect of war while making the action and (some of) the characters engaging.<sup>1</sup>

Basinger, in her excellent book, *The World War II Combat Film*, correctly notes a similarity in Hollywood's treatment of World War II and the Korean War, whereas, "the WWI film grew increasingly separate from both, and became associated almost exclusively with an anti-war statement."<sup>2</sup> In fact, one could go further in stating that before the Second World

**Platoon:** Tom Berenger, Martin Sheen and Willem Dafoe — the group conflict.





War, films on war could not really be grouped generically as *action* films, at least not those dealing with the war on land. Basinger astutely notes that from *Wings* (1927, William Wellman), through *Hell's Angels* (1930, Howard Hughes) and *Dawn Patrol* (1930, Howard Hawks) air combat in World War I (WWI) had been perceived as being particularly glamorous and exciting. One could also argue that the part played by the navy had been elevated by John Ford's championing of the service in films such as *The Blue Eagle* (1926), *Men Without Women* (1930), *Seas Beneath* (1931) and *Submarine Patrol* (1938). But, ever since Chaplin's debunking of the foot soldier's pathetic plight in *Shoulder Arms* in 1918, trench warfare has provided the sight for strong *anti-war* statements developed in *The Big Parade* (1925, King Vidor), *Barbed Wire* (1927, Rowland V. Lee), *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930, Lewis Milestone) and *Four Sons* (1928) — also by John Ford — and, even in the forerunner to service comedy, *What Price Glory?* (1926, Raoul Walsh) which introduced what Basinger calls the "Quirt/Flagg relationship," a competition between US army equals and rivals — which went on to become a key ingredient of the WWII Combat film.<sup>3</sup> Generally speaking, in WWI films, trench warfare is shown as being akin to suicide and in post-WWI films on the "Great War," this approach has been extended to one of blaming the powers that be for sending ordinary foot soldiers like lambs to the slaughter. A significant example of this approach is, of course, *Paths of Glory* (1956) by Stanley Kubrick.

Basinger marks *Bataan* (1942, Tay Garnett) as being the prototype for the WWII combat film and she details aspects of this film as being important generic traits: "The group as a democratic ethnic mix," "Internal group conflicts," "The faceless enemy," "The absence of women," as opposed to their presence in WWI films, "The journeying or staying nature of the genre: in a last stand, they win or lose; in a journey they also win or lose," "The tools of the cinema are employed to manipulate viewers into various emotional, cultural, and intellectual attitudes . . ." <sup>4</sup> This last ingredient is an important one that Basinger doesn't elaborate on, but to which I will return.

Later in her book, Basinger relates the "story" of what she calls the "Universal World War II combat film." Following are some of the 16 common elements: (2) "Closely connected to the presentation of the credits is a statement that may be called the film's dedication." (3) "A group of men, led by a hero, undertakes a mission which will accomplish an important military objective." (4) "This group contains an observer or commentator." (5) "The hero has leadership forced upon him in dire circumstances." (6) "They undertake a military objective." (7) "As they go forward the action unfolds." (8) "The enemy's presence is indicated . . . He is sometimes seen in close-up and is sometimes faceless." (12) "Members of the group die . . . The minorities almost always die, and die most horribly." Basinger doesn't speculate on why the minorities are sacrificed. But, whatever interpretation one would choose to make, the rationale would seem to be racist, e.g., minorities are expendable. (13) "A climactic battle takes place, and a learning or growth process occurs." (14) "The tools of cinema are employed . . ." (15) "The situation is resolved. (It will be so only after sacrifice and loss, hardship and discouragement, and it can be resolved either through victory or defeat, death or survival.)" After "The End": (16) "The audience is ennobled for having shared their combat experience, as they are ennobled for having undergone it. We are all comrades in arms."<sup>5</sup>

This last statement notwithstanding, it goes without saying

that all of the traits supplied by Basinger and listed here are present in *Platoon* (and I think most of them that I have omitted): (2) The dedication — to the men who fought and died in Vietnam — appears at the end, giving it even more force.

(3) The "important military objective" that is apparently accomplished is for Chris/Charlie Sheen's platoon to function as "bait" to "lure out" the "entire 41st NVA regiment" (in Chris' words).

(4) The observer is Chris, who is a surrogate for the film director, Stone.

(5) He becomes a "leader" in the final battle.

(6) & (7) The undertaking of a military objective, and, going forward as the action unfolds are clearly central.<sup>6</sup>

(8) The enemy (NVA) are first viewed through Chris' eyes as silhouettes, in the nighttime jungle mist, and at the end of the film they return to being "faceless."

(12) Many "group members" die, a young black soldier, Manny/Corkey Ford, the "most horribly."

(13) The "climactic battle" is an extended ambush, and, in the last (voice-over) words of the film, Chris states that "those of us who did make it have an obligation to build again, to teach to others what we know and to try with what's left of our lives to find a goodness and meaning to this life . . ." (16)

In fact the resemblance of *Platoon* to the WWII Combat film genre is so close it is amazing that it hasn't been everyone's first reaction on seeing the film. In fairness, one must note that Basinger discusses the evolution of the genre after 1945 as being one that includes a mixture of first-hand experience and the artifice of the genre as it developed during the war (as a primarily propagandistic one). Thus, one must give Stone the benefit of the doubt in allowing him that much of the action (and character traits) in his film is grounded in "reality" but, most of the above-mentioned traits in *Platoon*, including its "narrative" structure are surely derived from other films rather than life. (Stone was, after all, also a film student.)

However, it is necessary here to record points of departure and variation in *Platoon*. The ethnic mixture of the group is not multi- but dual — i.e., black and white — and Stone admittedly includes far more blacks in the film than previous Hollywood war films (except perhaps *Apocalypse Now*) to realistically portray the actual racial make-up of the American forces in Vietnam. But this mixture just adds to a key ingredient: the conflict between different members of the group (the 10th element in Basinger's scheme).<sup>7</sup> Also, the three central characters played by Tom Berenger, Charlie Sheen and Willem Dafoe are all white, and audience members, whether black or white (male or female) could find qualities in them (particularly strength) with which to identify. No blacks in the film are similarly marked as "leaders." Perhaps most people would argue that the conflict in *Platoon* makes it a special case, where the war is seen to be internal, having the enemy within rather than without. In this light one can locate a series of oppositions: Sergeants Elias/Dafoe and Barnes/Berenger battling for Chris' soul, pot smokers set against boozers, left against right, black against white. Yet Stone is here just amplifying something inherent to the genre — the group conflict again — and, in any case, the final battle is very clearly fought against the Vietnamese, allowing the Sheen character (and others) to emerge victorious and grow in (heroic) stature. Again, the film is grounded in the genre, as, according to Basinger, though "conflict" in the "universal WWII Combat Film" "breaks out within the group itself. It is resolved through the external conflict



brought down upon them."<sup>8</sup>

I would like now to focus on two specific elements in Basinger's *Bataan* model: "the face of the enemy" and "the tools of cinema." In the first case there would seem to be a significant departure in *Platoon* and this involves the village scene, a paradigm for My Lai. The nervousness of the soldiers can be well understood by the audience through the unseen enemy "out there" somewhere in the jungle, and the Americans' hatred has been spurred on by the (problematic) image of Manny's dead body. Thus when the platoon reaches a village, the interrogation is infected perversely by their previous experience. One can understand their irrational overreactions, without of course condoning it. Momentarily, at least, one also has a glimpse of the "other" side: one can sympathize with these people because they are presented as human beings. And, up until this juncture in the film, it would be appropriate to declare *Platoon* different enough from the standard Combat film as to be exemplary of an anti-war film viewed from an American, inside perspective. Yet, from this point on, Stone slips back into genre to such an extent that the most crassly commercial aspects of its '80s variant: high powered "over-the-top" visceral effects and Superman (i.e., Rambo) heroics overwhelm the hopeful seeds of a statement on war (and the particular Vietnam example of it). Worse yet: the enemy from Vietnam — never referred to in *Platoon* as other than "Gooks" or "Cong" — revert to being just that: the terrifyingly faceless enemy in the alien jungle.

In *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War*

*II*, Kathryn Kane notes that the infantry (as in *Objective Burma!*) is far less "comfortable" than the navy and air force in its being "bogged down, slow moving and vulnerable."<sup>9</sup> She sees the soldiers also as being less protected than members of the other services and in the Asia/Pacific arena they are in constant danger of being swallowed up by the jungle. There is a constant threat of encirclement, enemy attack and disease. An extension of this idea is provided in a remarkable article written (much earlier) by Tom Englehart, entitled "Ambush at Kamikaze Pass."<sup>10</sup> Englehart discusses the treatment of 3rd World peoples in Hollywood movies as an extension to that of the Indians in Westerns, and shows how the encirclement of wagons by Indians is a paradigm for that of the surrounding of US forces in war movies set in the Phillipines and Indochina. His topic is racism and, like Basinger, he makes a clear distinction between the European arena (in both World Wars) and the Asia/Pacific arena. Ultimately, it seems to me that Stone is guilty of representing the Vietnamese forces as similarly dangerous, faceless, and alien, a part of the jungle, as it were. And, though one might remember the "My Lai" scene when one leaves the theatre, this humanizing incident takes place far too early in the film to have a lasting impact. Instead, we are left with the Charlie Sheen character as both hero and narrator and his words of wisdom on the war. But even his presence is overwhelmed by, in Basinger's words, "the tools of cinema." Graphic carnage dominates the climactic ambush, and one is led to hate the Vietnamese as Junior is bayoneted and a bullet is fired into Bunny's mouth, turning the villain of the village atrocity into

The soldiers in *Platoon*.





a victim.

Most observers agree that the experience of watching *Platoon* is an extremely powerful one, and such a response derives most obviously from Stone's undoubted mastery of the cinematic "tools." His gut-wrenching action coupled with a subjective shooting style, dynamic editing and emotionally moving music (composed by the great Georges Delarue) work on the viewer. This is where the film "gets" the audience "both ways." On the one hand, the carnage of war is seen to be atrocious, but on the other is it made so exciting that it is possible to enjoy it (as many member of the audience watching it with me did). Though Stone would surely never admit it, *Platoon* was hugely successful because it appealed to hawks as well as doves, to Rambophiles as well as Rambophobes. Also, in having a young, white male character at the centre who leaves the film as a virtual hero, the biggest segment of the audience for Hollywood films over the last 10 years and the target for most of them — white male teenagers — is being appealed to (deliberately, I feel). Conversely, no one emerges triumphant or heroic at the end of *Full Metal Jacket* — except perhaps the Vietnamese woman who is slaughtered — and the action is never presented in such a way that it can be "enjoyed." Unlike *Platoon*, it is a genuine anti-war statement and is perhaps the first English language fiction feature to tell the "truth" about the Vietnam War experience from the American side. In large part, this is because it strays far from the genre of the WWII Combat film. □

## ENDNOTES

1. Janine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 170.
2. Basinger, p. 88.
3. Quirt/Edmund Lowe, was the "professional" soldier, whereas Flagg/Victor McLaglen seemed more interested in having fun. Basinger

considered their relationship to be "the single most important contribution of the WWI film to the WWII film." p. 92.

4. Basinger lists 10 other traits, including "the objective" and "death." pp. 61-62.
5. In order to more clearly refer to the elements I have numbered them. Basinger didn't. pp. 73-75.
6. It seems to me that in at least one important way, the WWII Combat film is very different from other "classical" Hollywood genres. The stories are episodic. There is one military action after another. Interestingly, though, such a structure has become typical in recent "horror" movies. The crossover film would appear to be Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963), where recurring bird attacks emerge as a central focus.
7. Basinger, p. 75.
8. This is, again, the 10th element, p. 75.
9. Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982), p. 45. The book is a revised version of her PhD thesis, University of Iowa, 1972.
10. Tom Englehart, "Ambush at Kamikaze Pass," *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 3, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 1971).

## POSTSCRIPT:

"The War Film: Contexts and Images" was a superb conference. Film scholars, other academics with a particular interest in war, and filmmakers participated as well as veterans, many of whom worked or studied at The William Joiner Center. Film screenings were well attended and the panels were lively. Though I haven't changed my opinion of *Platoon* I now respectfully realize that Stone's film struck a responsive chord with many combat veterans of the Vietnam war. Disturbingly, though, I also learned that US army recruiting has been successfully conducted immediately following screenings of *Full Metal Jacket*. It would appear that there is a certain segment of the youthful male population that is attracted to combat, per se, regardless of its treatment or message. It became clear to many conference participants that a highly stylized treatment of combat, or a complete absence of it might be the only ways to put forward a strong anti-war statement. Such a film, and the only fiction feature available in the West, made from a Vietnamese point of view, was screened during the conference. This is *Karma* (1986), a very sad but beautiful film, directed by Ho Quang Minh.

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**The Wanderers:** Jim Youngs, Ken Wahl, John Friedrich and Tony Ganios.



# Getting A Fix On The '60s:

## PHILIP KAUFMAN'S *THE WANDERERS* REVISITED

by Susan Morrison

**A**MONG THE TYPES OF FILMS CLASSIFIED AS 'teen films' there is a sub-category that concerns itself with 'gang' culture; that is, those narratives whose energies are invested in representing adolescent male bonding at the level of the mean city streets. From the operatic romanticism of *West Side Story* (1961) to the grittily glamorous hyper-realism of *Colors* (1988), 'bad boys' have wielded a certain fascination on the imaginations of 'good boys' (and 'good girls') who, after all, make up the majority of the movie-going public. The reasons for this fascination are pretty obvious. These films afford the viewer the vicarious pleasure inside the theatre of participating in and experiencing modes of behaviour forbidden to them on the out-

side. When the boundaries blur and artifice becomes reality, when the bad boys on screen influence the movie audience to react in a similarly violent manner as they leave the theatre, the system collapses and a crisis ensues. Paramount had just such a crisis on its hands nine years ago when its just-released film, Walter Hill's *The Warriors*, apparently incited its predominantly male audiences to erupt in acts of sporadic violence and vandalism once outside the movie theatre. The *New York Times* of Feb. 23, 1979, relates that Paramount pulled the picture from distribution for six days, changed the advertisement, both text ("These are the Armies of the Night. They are 100,000 strong. They outnumber the cops 5 to 1. They could run New York City. Tonight they're all out to get the Warriors") and illustration (a mob of assorted gang members stretching to the horizon), and offered to pay for additional



security guards at all theatres which agreed to continue showing the film. While the entire episode sounds uncomfortably reminiscent of '50s publicity stunts (*The Warriors* actually grossed \$3,478,000 in its first three days while it had cost \$4,000,000 to produce), the adverse reaction to the whole affair by the public and distribution networks resulted in the suppression or failure of other films in any way even remotely connected in content to Hill's picture.

Philip Kaufman's *The Wanderers* had the misfortune to go into release just five months later, and with the titles so similar in sound (*The Warriors/The Wanderers*) and implication (gang life), the fact that Kaufman's film was totally unlike *The Warriors* in terms of theme and narrative, and in its own right possessed an exceptionally fine script, soundtrack, and visual style, failed to salvage it from a disastrous reception. Although a few critics noticed it (*Variety*, June 11, 1979: "well-made and impressive"), most disregarded it altogether. Some films which bomb at the box office manage to recoup their losses and find their audience through release on television, but *The Wanderers* has not been given airplay, in all probability because of its insistence on replicating the language of the kids it's portraying. The dialogue is liberally sprinkled with enough swear words to achieve an R rating. This brief paper will therefore attempt to revive interest in the film in order to give it a second chance at finding an audience.

*The Wanderers* may be situated historically towards the end of the cycle of teen/nostalgia films generated by the overwhelming success in 1973 of George Lucas' *American Graffiti*. Lucas' film offered a number of innovations on the 'teen' film, first among them being its 'retro' positioning of the action 11 years earlier in 1962. This was not mere chance. What '1962' represented to its 1973 audience was a pre-Vietnam America whose adolescents existed in a state of innocence that the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate (audience of) teenagers and adults had lost, seemingly forever. *American Graffiti* was romanticised nostalgia, pure and simple, where the kids have nothing to do but cruise their restored cars up and down the strip looking for action that hardly ever comes. The only hint of the reality of the outside world occurs in the film's now-famous conceit of a post-script which forecloses on the adolescent pleasures of its protagonists. Two of them will be affected by the Vietnam war: Toad, missing in action; Curt, living in Canada presumably as a draft dodger (why else would anyone come up to Canada?).

One of the reasons for *American Graffiti*'s phenomenal success was that its target audience was not just teenagers. The nostalgizing of the '60s called back into the movie theatres all those Baby Boomers in their late twenties and early thirties who had experienced that period as teenagers. "Where were you in '62" was the publicity slogan for the film. Obviously the teen of 1973 was still in kindergarten if not nursery school! In addition, the soundtrack consisting of some 41 rock and roll hits including California surf music was guaranteed to invoke a sentimental revival of the popular music of the '50s and early '60s. For the 1973 adolescent bombarded by the glitter rock and incipient heavy metal music of the period, these songs provided an acceptable alternative.

Thematically, however, *American Graffiti* is an absolutely conventional teen film. Its concerns revolve around sex (Should Steve and Laurie do it or not? Will Curt find his fantasy female?), school (Will Curt and/or Steve go away to college?), and cars (Does John still have the fastest car in town?). In retrospect, 15 years later, *American Graffiti* has little to offer its viewer other than the curiosity value of

seeing its now famous stars when they were unknowns.

*The Wanderers*, like *American Graffiti*, takes place in the '60s, 1963 to be exact, and also contains a soundtrack which relies almost totally on rock and roll classics. But Kaufman's film is not a superficial nostalgic look at pre-Vietnam teen life, nor does it merely exploit the popular music of the period, as did *American Graffiti* and so many other films since. What Kaufman and his wife Rose have done is to take a prize-winning 1971 novel by Richard Price and transform it into an extremely intelligent and witty narrative that comments on its time period (early '60s) and characters in a critical yet genuinely affectionate way, a feature all too often missing in the American cinema where characters and situations are so frequently stereotyped and predictable. Ostensibly a 'teen' film, i.e. its protagonists are teenagers confronting typical teenage problems, *The Wanderers* is at the same time a comedy (it has a very funny script), a musical in an era of non-musicals (the songs on the soundtrack are cued to the action in such a way that they reflect on what's happening on screen just as in a bona fide musical, e.g. in the opening number "Walk Like A Man," we see the members of the Fordham Baldies assembling on the street, each one with his studded black leathers, jack boots, and shaved skull in a veritable parody of macho style), and a surrealistic horror film (with one of the gangs, the Duckie Boys, Kaufman pays direct homage to the zombies from Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, not just in their affectless zombie-ized appearance but in their actions as well).

Set in the Bronx in 1963, as a subtitle informs us just minutes into the film, *The Wanderers* repeats *American Graffiti*'s focus on four boys — Richie, Joey, Perry, and Turkey — on the verge of manhood. (As Turkey says at the beginning of *The Wanderers*, "You can't be a Wanderer after graduation. I'm thinking of my future.") The narrative is an episodic working-out of this theme, with its ultimate and inevitable conclusion in the dissolution of the group, when childhood loyalties are replaced by adult necessities. While *American Graffiti*, set in Modesto, California was resolutely white, suburban, and middle class, *The Wanderers* is firmly entrenched in a racially (but not socially) integrated, urban, working class environment. Ethnicity, usually suppressed in the melting pot of American films, is foregrounded in this one. All but one of the gangs are segregated according to race and ethnic background. The Wanderers are an all-Italian gang; the Del Bombers, all "coloured," and the Wongs are "27 Chinese boys whose last name is Wong and who all know jujitsu." These gangs, unlike the ones in *The Warriors*, function more like surrogate boys' clubs, albeit ones that condone street fighting. They provide their members with an identity, a sense of belonging and companionship which substitutes for the fragmentation and alienation experienced in their daily lives due to parental absence, indifference, or abuse. It is important to note that some of the pride of identification is based on the ethnic or racial origin of the gang. There is a scene in the film which quite clearly and boldly depicts the intensity of prejudicial hatred, and even more boldly indicates no solution, or no institutionally mandated one at any rate. Mr. Sharpe, the history teacher, attempts to teach his all-male class a lesson in brotherhood. After writing "All men are created equal" on the blackboard, he divides the students according to colour and ethnicity, i.e., into "coloureds" and "Italians." He then asks them to list all the names they call each other after school. While hesitant at first, the students quickly get caught up in this exercise, to the point where the class erupts into an uncontrollable frenzy of name-calling and fist-fighting. What was originally intended as a lesson in combatting prejudice by the well-meaning but



unprepared teacher, disintegrates into an example of just how it works. By the end of the film, the different ethnic and racial groups do come together in friendship, but not through the intervention of any 'rational' adult.

The Wanderers are from working class Italian backgrounds. Unlike Curt and Steve in *American Graffiti*, there is no question of a college education in their future. Their lives revolve around the gang and the streets. They are socially coded by the music they listen to (white rock and roll), the clothes they wear (jeans, T shirts, gold satin jackets), the way they wear their hair (long and slicked back with lots of grease), and the way they spend their time (playing "elbow/tit" on the street). There is little evidence that these boys have evolved much from the 'greasers' of the '50s. In fact, a publicity still used for advertising the film and for the record cover shows the gang minus Turkey hanging out the windows of an old automobile ogling a girl — a shot not in the film but rather, like a 'tableau vivant,' the reproduction of a famous '50s *Life* magazine photograph. Some of the tension in this film comes from the viewer's foreknowledge and hindsight that time, unlike photographs, does not stand still; that the boys might be immersed in '50s culture, but that they live at the edge of a new era. The film is set in 1963 for a very specific reason. That date marks the turning point in American society, a kind of national coming-of-age, when the assassination of President Kennedy in November shocked

the country out of its naiveté and brought it face to face with the political reality of its own destructive destiny. The rapid escalation of the Vietnam war into a full-scale American commitment that ensued under Kennedy's successor, Lyndon Johnson, increased the sense of helplessness of those who opposed such aggressive actions, and resulted in the schismatic polarization of Americans along generational lines — children against parents, young against old — in protest of the war and the politics that begat it.

But *The Wanderers* is not about the rebels of the '60s, nor does it pretend to be politicized in the way that a film like *Dirty Dancing* (1987) does, using the same time period (summer, 1963) to invoke a sense of political correctness, while really being concerned only with (teenage) female fantasies. However, the points at which the outside world both affect and reflect the reality of the adolescents' inside world creates a poignancy in *The Wanderers* missing in other teen films. One of the most important themes of the 'teen film' genre is that of the problems inherent in growing up, of the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood suffered by the adolescent. While the sense of loss is often overwhelming, nevertheless, the move must be made in order to achieve maturity. In American films about teenagers, there is an inevitable tendency to consider leaving home as a requisite step towards independence. Those who stay behind are seen as locked into a regressive situation, one which can lead to a

Ken Wahl and Toni Kalem in **The Wanderers**.







ABOVE — **American Graffiti**: Debbie (Candy Clark) and Terry (Charlie Martin Smith). BELOW — A publicity still for **The Wanderers**.





doubling of their parents' limited lives. If the American myth is that golden opportunity awaits all who seek it, then those who don't are seen as losers. In *American Graffiti* this is demonstrated after the fact by the fate that awaits each boy. John, who stays at home as a garage mechanic, is summarily run over by a drunk driver. Toad, who also remains in town, is sent off to Vietnam never to return. Steve, who could have gone east to college but chose to stay with his high school sweetheart instead, ends up as an insurance agent, for some reason an occupation guaranteed to elicit a snicker in the audience. Curt, the only boy who leaves home willingly, is rewarded by becoming a writer, with all the chance of overnight success that such occupations provide. This rather cavalier treatment of the four central characters, or rather of the audience which has just sat through almost two hours following the peregrinations of these likeable fellows only to be chumped off at the end, is not followed through in *The Wanderers*. To begin with, the Wanderers' lives are much more circumscribed by class differences than were those of the protagonists in *American Graffiti*. Of the four main characters, the two who do escape, Joey and Perry, leave because of intolerable family situations. Perry's mother, an alcoholic, has been committed to an institution, leaving him to fend for himself. Joey flees because of his father, whose physical and emotional abuse he can no longer tolerate. Before he leaves, though, he manages to smash a liquor bottle over his father's head. Their joint departure for California at the film's end signals the only hope expressed by the film for its protagonists. While we don't know what's going to happen to them, we find relief in the fact that they have taken matters into their own hands; that is, they've achieved a kind of independence. Turkey, who is perhaps the least likeable person in the entire film, is the first to make his move towards securing his future. His decision is to join another gang, a 'career' gang, the Fordham Baldies, who nevertheless reject his fawning and sycophantic manner — a rejection that results in Turkey's frantic search for friends, only to end up among the dreaded DuckieBoys and imminent death.

Richie, the leader of the Wanderers, is the most popular and prominent member of the quartet. He is also the one whose ultimate fate elicits the most sympathy from the audience. While we don't see or hear anything about his family, his involvement with his girlfriend Despie is central to the story. She is a wonderfully rendered character right out of the early '60s, with teased hair, stiff crinolines, and constant gum-chewing, who is not too bright but is nonetheless treated with respect by the film. One of the progressive features of this film is its treatment of women. Unlike most male-centred teen films, the females in *The Wanderers* are not left as stereotypes; we are permitted to identify with them, not merely laugh at them or fantasize about them. Despie's father, Chubby Galasso, owns a bowling alley with his four brothers, who all wear Hawaiian shirts; presumably they make a lot of money in other less legitimate activities, for they (all?) live in an enormous castle-like house and drive big black Cadillacs. Halfway through the film, Richie meets Nina, a girl from a different part of New York City. She is first seen carrying a guitar case in one hand and a copy of Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the other, with her hair worn long and straight, and a pair of sunglasses perched on her nose. While this visual 'coding' places her culturally and socially apart from Richie (a 'folkie' to his 'greaser'), this difference does not separate them, nor is it ever referred to except at the end of the film. Nina and Richie have a brief romance which is interrupted by Despie's discovering them making out in a car in front of her house. Nina leaves, and Richie is shunned by everyone for his betrayal not only of Despie but also of

Joey, whom he had 'set up' with Nina initially. What brings Richie and Despie back together again is presented in a remarkable scene. Richie, walking by himself, comes across a number of people weeping on the street. The source of their sorrow, however, is not apparent. As he turns a corner, we see that the crowd is responding to a news bulletin concerning President Kennedy's assassination carried on television sets in a store window. Richie walks over to Despie and they stand together, sharing their grief. The soundtrack plays Ben E. King's version of "Stand By Me," a tune which takes on new meaning in this context. The song carries through into the next scene — a device Kaufman uses on many occasions in this film to join cuts and scene changes — but shifts in meaning when Despie informs Richie that she's pregnant. From this point on, Richie's fate is sealed. There is no doubt that they will do the right thing and get married. Mr. Galasso insists that they move into the wood-panelled basement. During the bachelor party that closes the film, Richie is presented with his own Hawaiian shirt by the Galasso brothers, with the assurance that he will grow into it. At just this moment, Richie sees Nina pass by the restaurant where this is taking place. He excuses himself and leaves to follow her. Eventually he sees her enter a folk music club (presumably Gerde's Folk City . . . an indication that we are now no longer in the Bronx but in Greenwich Village) and goes up to the window but does not enter. On the soundtrack we hear Bob Dylan singing "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and the camera moves into the club, following Nina, to show Dylan himself in performance. The camera holds on Richie on the outside, looking in at Nina as she sits down with some friends. Richie turns away, unable to enter, and returns to the party.

What is marked out in this brief sequence is a lost possibility for Richie, a possibility for change which he can't or won't accept. Dylan's lyrics express the challenge of those years when things changed so abruptly and so inevitably, when young people began to question what their parents had taken for granted. Richie is fated to be forever locked into the past, into a repetition of someone else's life — in this case, a Galasso brother. His response to the message of Dylan's song is to step back rather than move ahead. That is the reason that the film ends not on Richie, but on a shot of Joey and Perry as they head out for California along the New Jersey Turnpike. Their future is open, whereas Richie's is closed.

*The Wanderers* is an exceptional film for many reasons. I have chosen to mention only a few, and have focussed only on one; the way that it locates its participants firmly within an historical framework, and uses that framework to mark out the turning points of adolescence. There is a parallel being made in the film between the dissolution of the internal loyalties of the gang, the Wanderers, under the pressure of external social realities, with the disillusion of the nation that is imminent under the pressure of the presidential assassination and the Vietnam war.

*Come Senators, Congressmen, please heed the call,  
Don't stand in the doorway, don't block up the hall,  
For he who is hurt will be he who has stalled,  
The battle outside raging,  
Will soon shake your windows and rattle your walls,  
For the times, they are a-changin'.*

(Bob Dylan)

In the light of so much recent interest in the '60s, not just the music and miniskirt but also and especially the Vietnam war, a film like *The Wanderers* takes on new importance for it represents an early attempt to come to terms with the era at the level of the ordinary person. □



# W G D E E T

**"THE BEST MOVIE ABOUT TEENAGERS SINCE 'REBEL WITHOUT A CAUSE'"**  
New York Times

**"A ONCE BANNED CLASSIC... AN INFLUENCE ON EVERY MAJOR YOUTH MOVIE WHICH FOLLOWED FROM CARPENTER'S TO COPPOLA'S"**  
City Limits

**"BRILLIANT...SUPERB"**  
NME

**"A REAL YOUTH-IN-REVOLT MOVIE, ONE WITH ZAP AND STYLE"**  
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**"TERRIFIC...MAKES OTHER YOUTH MOVIES SEEM SOFT"**  
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by Bryan Bruce

**I**N A PERIOD IN WHICH A writer/director/producer such as John Hughes, a clever, if relatively innocuous and facile, talent, has pretty much single-handedly cornered the formidable cinematic youth market, *River's Edge*, as a 'serious' teen film, seemed to me, on first viewing, a remarkable movie. On repeated viewing, and, more importantly, since watching *Over the Edge* again after several years, I've become much less excited about the former film, and much more so about the latter. Although the differences between the two works, which take on the task of typifying modern youth, can be partly attributed to their respective historical moments (the representation

of teenagers in *River's Edge* more purposefully consistent with the continuing, lumbering advance of the Reactionary Cinema), there is something that distinguishes the earlier film from its '80s counterpart — an edge — which this analysis of the two films in their totality (including issues of marketing, distribution, genre, 'message,' and so on) will attempt to articulate.

Before getting to the films themselves, I want to establish my position regarding the 'political' nature of teen movies, including a brief defence of devoting an issue of a "magazine of radical film criticism and theory" to what may be regarded by some 'film academics' or 'serious critics' as a low-brow or disposable 'genre' unworthy of prolonged consideration. The very word "political" in the sense that I want to get at has, perhaps, already been exhausted and rendered meaningless, particularly in the context of Toronto 'art and culture' publications, but certainly the worst misappropriation of the term has been its confusion with 'political correctness,' a particularly leftist tendency toward the adoption of a legitimized rhetoric and set of theoretical preoccupations that acts as a substitute for activism or practice. Unhappily, to be 'political' in art and academic circles often means to be concerned about the issues currently deemed 'important' ('in?') by the entrenched Left ('Nicaragua' is a good example) regardless of their relevance to one's personal experience or situation, and to assume an aggressively moralistic and condescending position towards anything that falls outside of this orthodoxy. The Situationist Movement, an ultra-left formation, has long



The teens of *Over the Edge*.



been critical of the capacity of the established Left to police itself with this restrictive and ineffectual political posturing; in the "Words to Live By" of Sit. practitioner Tom Ward, for example, we are warned, "Don't be sucked into the spectacle of national politics except insofar as it impinges on your own everyday life."<sup>1</sup> In opposition to abstract dogma and theory hopelessly dislocated from practice within the climate of an 'Establishment' (leftist ideals notwithstanding), we are urged to concentrate more on the revolution of every day. "Remember to affront the moral code at every opportunity," "Beware of career radicals — hide the silverware!"<sup>2</sup>; these are the practical recommendations of a Sit. crit. who recognizes the danger of thought and action alternately sanctioned or censored by institutions and publications of the Left. A further liability of 'political correctness' is its recuperability, the adherence to a single, doctrinaire political issue or set of issues effectively diffusing any oppositional momentum directed against the *totality* of extant ideology and cultural codes. Sit. Bob Black describes the recuperative powers of "contemporary class society" as "... the assimilation of oppositional currents which, by challenging only isolated aspects of the world-system, end up reforming or reinforcing them,"<sup>3</sup> precisely the dynamic which has, for example, all but dismantled the gay movement. Rather than maintain a criteria of subversive activity and an unapologetic expression of difference against the heterosexual paradigm, gay 'liberation' quickly became an adjunct of reformist liberalism, opposing only those laws which would prevent homosexuals from becoming part of the larger ideological continuum. Allowing gays to express a carefully measured and controlled amount of inconformity, the regulating cultural order subtly deflated any revolutionary potential the movement may have had, resulting in the production of homosexuals merely as minor deviations from the whitebread majority.

The gay movement could certainly learn something from punk, a movement which has sustained itself by eschewing notions of 'political correctness' (although more recently a punk 'orthodoxy' has begun to emerge) and by learning, to varying degrees of success, how to elude the recuperative advances of larger culture, a trick picked up from the Sits., a decided influence. Although riddled with problems (factionalization, sexism, violence . . . ), punk retains an edge which prevents it from becoming safely co-

optable, a sense of the underground (the press, music), of militancy (uniform, agitation, intervention), and the resistance to authority that the gay movement has long since lost. The stance is confrontational, direct: affronting the moral code, for example, or any code (or dress, behaviour) that is assumed to be 'natural' and 'proper;' engaging culture by inverting the signifiers of the mainstream through disruptive 'play;' an affinity for revolution over reform. What punk lacks is the one essential strategy that is *almost* built into the gay movement—the critique and overturning of assumptions about gender. Aside from early flirtations with androgyny and the original take-it-up-the-ass, fucked-over punk 'position,' the movement has developed, in reaction, an uneasy homophobia that only serves to undermine its revolutionary potential.

What does this mini-diatribes have to do with a couple of movies about juvenile delinquents? It's exactly these issues—of punk strategy, situation, and a revolutionary politic—that such teen films bring out spontaneously. The impetus behind them reminds us of this struggle of youth against authority and ideological indoctrination—a time for the questioning of everything. What separates *Over the Edge* from *River's Edge* in this respect is the veracity of its mediation, how effectively and truthfully this rebelliousness is translated into cinematic terms. The titles of the films begin to get at this difference, *Over the Edge* suggesting the pushing of limits, transgression, *River's Edge*, an impasse, a point of not crossing over. What follows, then, is an analysis of the distinction between 'radical' and 'safe' cinema.

First, some background for the films. Jonathan Kaplan's *Over the Edge* was completed in 1979, but nervously shelved by Orion, its distributor, in the face of protest against violence purportedly generated by the youth gang films that cropped up in the late '70s such as *The Warriors* and *Boulevard Nights*. It was finally released in 1982 to capitalize on Matt Dillon's subsequent popular success in several teen films<sup>4</sup> (*My Bodyguard* and *Little Darlings*, both 1980, and *Tex*, 1981, the latter also directed by Tim Hunter, who co-wrote *Over the Edge* [with Charles Haas] and directed *River's Edge*). I first saw *Over the Edge* at a crowded Cineplex theatre in the midst of a throng of kids who spoke at and cheered along with the film, an audience almost identical to the teenagers portrayed on the screen, and towards whom, presumably, the movie was directed. I first saw *River's Edge* at the 1986 Toronto film festival, and, sub-

sequently, at a second-run theatre, in the company of sobre, adult audiences who clicked their tongues and shook their heads at the spectacle of lost and wasted youths. The disparity I experienced between the venues of distribution and the target audiences for the two films has necessarily shaped my ensuing argument, raising several pertinent questions about the direction and limitations of popular cinema as it has developed in the past decade.

At the risk of falling into the trap of reductivism, I've worked out the following set of oppositions as the basis for a reading of the two films, followed by an analysis of these categories under various headings.

<i>Over the Edge</i>	<i>River's Edge</i>
late '70s	late '80s
transgression	impasse
'B' exploitation film	'A' 'art' film
docu-drama	black comedy
naturalism	aestheticism
designed for teens	designed for adults
identification	ironic distance
revolution	rebellion
punk	heavy metal
feminist	post-feminist
violence against property	murder
social-material concerns	drama of the body
real teens (non-actors)	'star' teens (actors)

### 1) Genre

As a Roger Corman alumnus, Jonathan Kaplan plays very naturally with the technique and vocabulary of the 'B' movie. The pre-fab SoCal cityscapes of graffitied walls and unfinished condominiums that form the backdrop of *Over the Edge* are perfectly suited to his flat, low-budget, early-'70s-made-for-TV style, a style that does not presume superiority over its subject. *River's Edge*, with its carefully rendered, contemplative compositions and aesthetic cinematography, gives more the impression of the art or art-house film (while remaining well within pop film conventions), thereby situating itself at a somewhat ironic distance from the teen movie content it presents. As I mentioned in the preamble, the target audience for the two films attests to this difference: both based on true stories about disaffected youths in Southern California, *Over the Edge* presents itself, like so many 'B' exploitation movies, as agit prop, appealing to a working or lower-middle class audience who can identify strongly with the dilemma of the characters and relate to 'B-movie syntax,' which might be described as an ad hoc naturalism



juxtaposed with the obviously staged spectacle—car crashes, big explosions, and ketchupy violence. *River's Edge* is pervaded with an air of restraint, encouraging the more serious, educated audience it is meant for to analyse the problem calmly, and to impose judgement. It's a position that, unfortunately, tends to coincide with the co-optive powers of popular culture and cinema, rational objectivity over-riding and containing the anarchic impulses of untamed youth. Whereas *Over the Edge* opens itself up to the more social-material concerns of the exploitation film—issues of property and private ownership, class struggle—*River's Edge* retreats to the more circumscribed, self-contained preoccupations of the 'art film': the drama of the body (the static, 'arty' shots of the murdered girl), and the interiority of madness only vaguely attributed to social and ideological determinants.

Like many exploitation films, *Over the Edge* has a docu-drama feel to it, opening, for example, with a statistic superimposed on the screen ("In 1978, 110,000 children under the age of 18 were arrested for acts of vandalism"), and reinforced by the use of non-actors and 'real' teen-agers. There are no 'stars' in the picture to convolute identification, which rests, instead, with a 14-year-old boy (Carl/Michael Kramer) who neither looks nor acts like any kind of cinematic idol. *River's Edge* is resolutely acted by several recognizable teen actors (Roxana Zal, Daniel Roebuck, Crispin Glover), and is completely out-balanced by the obligatory psycho performance from the over-worked Dennis Hopper, who, since successfully playing the alcoholic, psychotic father figure in his own film, *Out of the Blue*, in 1979,<sup>5</sup> has reprised the role no less than five times (*Rumble Fish*, *Hoosiers*, *The Pick-Up Artist*, *Blue Velvet*, and *River's Edge*), his presence, increasingly, becoming too vociferously 'significant' to be comfortably integrated into any narrative (which is precisely why it works, to some extent, in *Blue Velvet* alone).

Made in the same year, *Over the Edge* and *Out of the Blue* remain two of the most powerful and effective teen rebellion films ever made, largely owing to the filmmakers' instinct to exploit their own medium. Not compromised by the larger mechanics of the 'legitimate' film industry — self-censorship, and a de rigueur ideological conformity — the impetus behind these films comes from both the idealism of the maverick 'outsider' and the sense of urgency that comes out of the exigencies of low-budget, 'B' movie production. The

'exploitation' film is unquestionably a more appropriate vehicle for the subject of youth in revolt than, say, a Hollywood aesthete's homoerotic fetishization of the teen body (Coppola's *The Outsiders*, *Rumble Fish*), or the ironic disapproval of the 'serious issue' film (*River's Edge*).

## 2) Authorship

There is a certain authorial continuity between *Over the Edge* and *River's Edge*, which must be partly attributed to Tim Hunter's take on modern youth. Episodes with dislocated teenagers having furtive, sleeping bag sex or stealing guns to play out grown-up violence are shared by both films, as are the numerous scenes of kids driving cars or aimlessly wandering through suburban streets, drinking beer and getting stoned with no place to go. What's even more apparent, however, is how consistent *Over the Edge* is with Jonathan Kaplan's other work, expressing his particular B-movie weltanschauung and style with remarkable clarity.

Within the exploitation genre, Kaplan has always managed to express an almost Capraesque, 'rainbow coalition' populism, championing the very American underdog individualist who stands up for minority rights against the corruption of capitalist villains. From *Truck Turner* (1974), his blaxploitation effort starring *Shaft* composer Isaac Hayes, to *White Line Fever* (1975), an example of the auto crash exploitation sub-genre (*Death Race 2000*, *aloha bobby and rose*, et al) to *Over the Edge*, Kaplan pits exploited blacks, labourers, or minors against cops, corporate bullies, or exploitative landowners, appealing directly to the concerns of the audiences 'B' pictures tend to attract. *White Line Fever*, is particularly exemplary of this working class ethos, in which the trucker hero (Jan Michael Vincent), who refuses to run contraband for his greedy boss (Lee Van Cleef), takes on, with his black partner, the whole corporate monopoly that is behind the exploitation of his fellow workers. As with *Over the Edge*, *White Line Fever* is firmly rooted in social-material and class relations, including such issues as the control of environmental conditions as a facet of class exploitation (affordability of housing in *White Line Fever*; housing development as capitalist venture at the expense of recreational facilities for youths in *Over the Edge*), the power structures wielded by management over labour (or teacher over student, parent over child . . . ), and law enforcement in the service of big business (both films depict cops as

corrupt pawns of the capitalist bureaucracy). Many of the same themes are reworked in a feminist context in Kaplan's *Heart Like a Wheel*, in which the individualist race car driver heroine (Bonnie Bedelia) struggles alone against the moneyed, male-controlled sports establishment.

Kaplan's films, then, are often about characters who have been forced into the 'punk' position (the term originating from jail slang for the young inmate coerced into a sexually passive role), that is, who have been 'fucked over' by the system once too often, and start fighting back. This quality was obviously recognized by one of the original punks, Johnny Rotten, who, after having seen *Truck Turner*, recruited Kaplan to work on the Sex Pistols' cinematic venture, *The Great Rock 'N' Roll Swindle*, after its original director, Russ Meyer, left the project.<sup>6</sup> Also eventually replaced (by Julien Temple), Kaplan's experience with the Pistols in England became, nevertheless, an unmistakable influence on his next project, *Over the Edge*. Although neither depicting actual punks nor incorporating punk music (except for the Ramones' "Teenage Lobotomy"), *Over the Edge* captures the essence of the early punk movement in its extreme depiction of alienated youth and the violent explosiveness of its expression.

## 3) Punk versus Heavy Metal

If *Over the Edge* is representative of early punk, *River's Edge* can be taken as a film about the advent, a decade later, of heavy metal, a form of music with none of the political leanings of punk (although a 'crossover' in styles does, unfortunately, exist). The music for the soundtrack of *River's Edge* is all heavy metal (except for Agent Orange), and so is the attitude of the teens—smoke dope, drink beer, don't think too much. As with their heavy metal icons, any appeal to the rebel stance (the androgyny of Tim, the younger brother, for example, or Layne/Crispin Glover's outlaw self-image) is purely cosmetic, adopted without purpose. (In fact, Layne can equally embrace fantasies of being the iconoclast of *Easy Rider* and the American imperialist of a Chuck Norris movie without recognizing any contradiction.) What separates the 'punks' of *Over the Edge* from the 'headbangers' of *River's Edge* is the impetus behind the rebellion and the form it takes. In *Over the Edge*, the youths spontaneously organize a protest against the material terms of their oppression (the denial of access to their





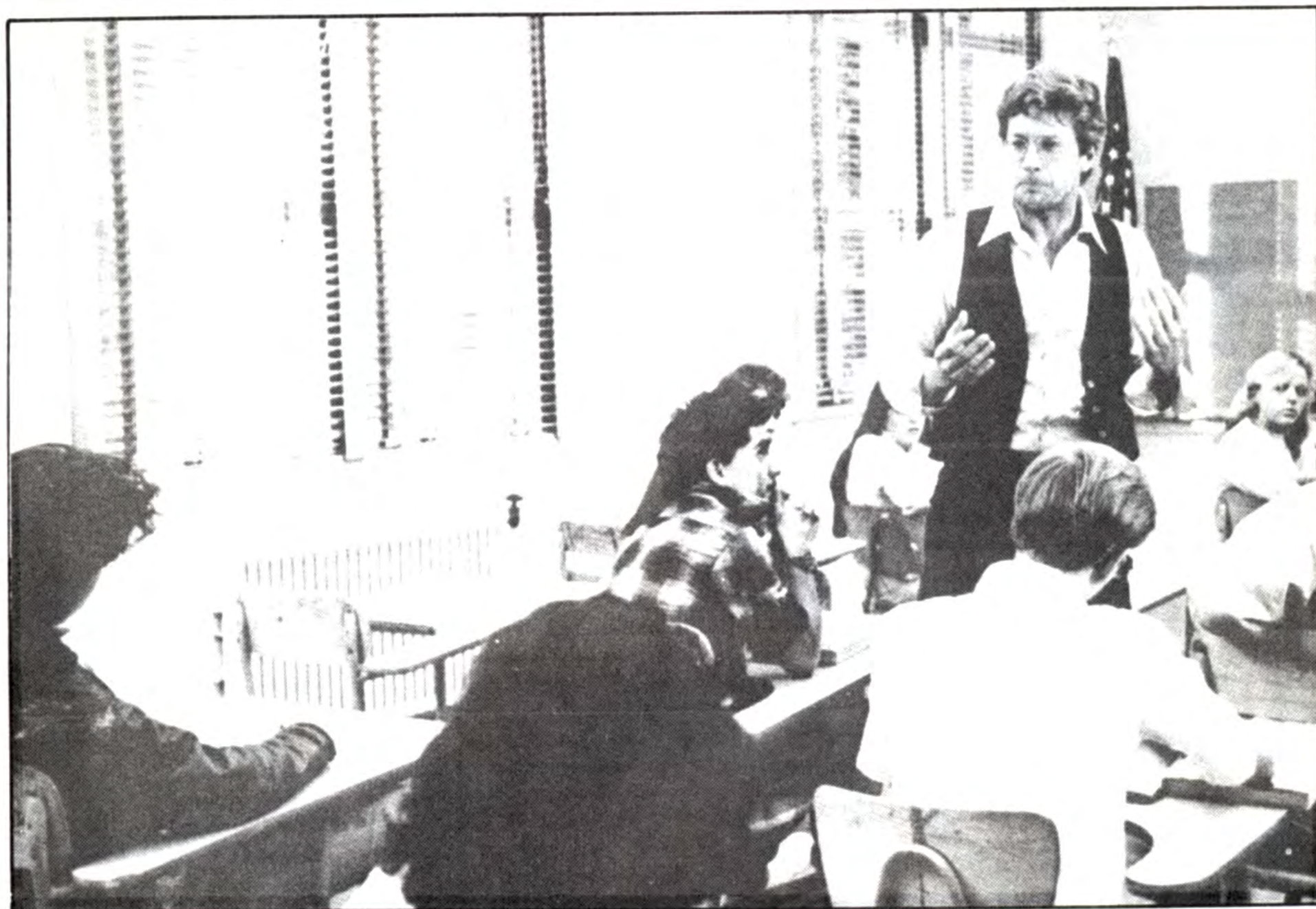
**River's Edge:** Sub-political psychos.







ABOVE — **River's Edge**: The doll metaphor as narrative closure. BELOW — Post-sixties radical burn-out.





rec. hall, the imposition of curfew, etc.) by directing their anger *collectively* towards those very forces that enslave them. The crimes committed by the *Over the Edge* teens are significantly against property — the school, their parents' cars — objects which, in the adult world, have assumed a greater importance than the people who own them. The crime committed by the individual, isolated youth in *River's Edge* is murder, violence directed against another individual as a result of repression. The teens of *Over the Edge* shoot their pellet guns from the overpass at police cars, the symbols of their oppression, to express their anger; their counterparts in *River's Edge* use the same weapon to kill crayfish in a pail, a senseless, inward expression of their hostility.

In *Hunting Humans*, Elliott Leyton, speaking of the modern multiple murderer, might be describing the kind of killing represented in *River's Edge* when he defines the murderous act as "... a kind of sub-political and conservative protest which nets the killer a substantial social profit of revenge, celebrity, identity, and sexual relief."<sup>7</sup> Most of these murders are committed in America by the white, heterosexual male who is unable to conform in spite of his desire to do so, who is rejected by the very culture that has produced him. In this sense, Leyton argues, the perpetrators of these crimes "... pose no threat to the established order, neither in their ideology nor in their acts."<sup>8</sup> The environmental factors that produce these killers — the broken homes, anonymity of suburban life, and dehumanization produced by a heightened industrialism described in *Hunting Humans* — are precisely rendered in *River's Edge*, as is the consciousness of celebrity and promotional influence of the media as accessory to the crime. But by attributing this "conservative protest" to modern youth, the film, which presents itself as a kind of exposé of one of today's biggest problems (the ad line reads, "This may be the most controversial film you will see this year"), tends to reduce teenage rebellion to the same apolitical terms that the heavy metal, death-rock industry thrives on: senseless violence, nihilism, murder fantasies, and an unmotivated and contrived rebel pose that has no material basis. *Over the Edge* depicts a much more articulate and meaningful adolescent insurgency, with children who lock their parents in the gymnasium and trash their school while donning Indian costumes and warpaint, recognizing their own affinity with other disenfranchised minorities. *River's Edge*, with its tone of ironic dis-

tance and detached resignation, seems to present youth itself as the problem, and fails to allow for a representation of the 'organized alienation' embodied by punk, playing into the entrenched assumptions of its middle class audience about the uniform worthlessness of any youth movement not sanctioned by 'legitimate' adult agencies (like the Boy Scouts, for example, or the Young Liberal Party).

#### 4) Feminism versus Post-feminism

The difference in representation of women in the two films can be seen, again, partly as an index of their respective historical moments, and partly as a further indication of the more thoroughly integrated radical project put forward by the earlier film. Like early punk, whose strong assaultive female performers virtually fronted the movement, *Over the Edge* features girls as an equal force in the revolt, with Cory, the one who shares a sleeping bag with Carl, toting a stolen gun and talking about her aspirations of becoming a truck driver like her hero whose picture she has cut out of the newspaper — a 95 lb. woman who drove her rig 100,000 miles.<sup>9</sup> In the almost surrealistic scenes of anarchy at the school, girls figure prominently, including one who runs by carrying a huge globe, stopping to spit "eat it you stinking pig" at Doberman, the nasty cop, and a pair who take over the PA system (a sophisticated revolutionary gesture), imitating the annoying adult voices that control their daily behaviour ("practice your piano"). Further, one of the few sympathetic and intelligent adult characters in the film is a woman, who runs the rec. centre for the kids and confronts Doberman about the killing of Ritchie/Matt Dillon. *River's Edge* presents girls who treat rape as a joke and have crushes on their history teacher *despite* his leftist politics. The post-'60s co-opted liberalism espoused by that same teacher gives precise expression to the 'post-feminist' line when he says to his female students, "Like it or not, ladies, you're expected to have a career now," speaking in anachronisms ("ladies") about feminism as if its advances are actually a burden to women. Once again, the description of the modern 'condition,' while perhaps accurate, is delivered as beyond redemption, a position that does not allow for the expression of any political context outside of, in this case, the caricatures of left-over '60s radical burn-out.

The representation of the female body in *River's Edge* has been construed

by some feminists as overtly sexist, the film having been accused of complicity with the very aspects of misogyny it attempts to describe. I'm not totally convinced of this, although I do think the specific brand of 'black humour' the film deals in does somewhat compromise the obvious critique of male attitudes towards women and women's bodies that runs through the narrative (the ironic inversion of the callous treatment of the murdered girl and the respectful, human treatment of the inflatable sex doll, for example). The revelation of the body at the beginning seems to me to have been handled in a particularly non-exploitive way, the slow track in and abrupt cut to the girl's face, entirely without dramatic music or manipulative camera identification, appearing more meditative than sensational. The problem with the film's critique of masculinity lies mostly with the misplacement of its humour, the male 'monster' figures, Feck/Dennis Hopper and John/Daniel Roebuck, albeit intended as absurd parodies of prevalent male attitudes, becoming, instead, the focus of comedy. Feck's jokes, which are, presumably, meant to demonstrate his psychosis and misogyny ("I ate so much pussy in those days my beard looked like a glazed donut") become the point of male identification in the audiences I watched the film with (at least, the men laughed the loudest). "I put the gun to the back of her head and blew her brains out the front. I was in love," says Feck, describing the demise of his former 'wife.' With lines like these, and a hammy performance, Hopper easily becomes another one of those romantic, insane heroes (who kills his wife, but it's funny! — like William Burroughs) that Americans love to revere, identification with this kind of figure clouding the position of the film towards its already difficult subject matter.

#### 5) Narrative

As I've already mentioned, *Over the Edge* is designed as a kind of teen agit prop, including the use of various narrative techniques that identify us very closely with adolescent experience. At the beginning of the movie, the children are shown a film at school by the president of the home-owners association about the problem of vandalism in America, and the disgusting crime of the destruction of private property. The kids cheer the film as a gesture of contempt for both the authoritarian tone of the whole exercise and as an indication of their instinctive grasp of the real, capitalist motives behind the urban development that threatens their rec. hall and



their freedom of assembly. As a narrative device, the scene is doubly effective in that it plays on the position of the teen audience to *Over the Edge*: this exploitation movie is not to be taken as a moralistic indictment of rebellious behaviour, but as a pro-youth, anti-establishment 'fantasy' for kids to cheer along with. *Over the Edge* also identifies teens with the 'hero,' Carl, through the centrality of music to the narrative, allowing us to hear the songs he blasts on his headphones to block out the adult world, the overlapping use of sound sealing our identification with his alienation.

As opposed to the otherwise less contrived presentation of subject matter in *Over the Edge*, emphasizing its impression of docu-drama, *River's Edge* relies on a heavy symbolism integrated into a standard narrative, the most obvious example of this being the doll metaphor, the film opening with Tim throwing his sister's doll in the river, answered as closure with the inflatable sex doll floating likewise at the end. Compare this heavily coded 'message' to the field of mixed signifiers in *Over the Edge* used to depict anarchy as the children overrun the school, a scene in which everyday objects are relieved of their normal significance as they are enlisted in the strategy of revolution. Whether or not one believes the film is fully conscious of its significance, the central metaphor of the dead female body in *River's Edge* is more conducive to a distanced and closed reading of the social problems the image stands in for, the very structure of the narrative positing these issues as merely an unfortunate and irrevocable reality.

**A**S I FEARED, THE TERMS of analysis I've used to compare the two films have resulted in a rather more harsh treatment of *River's Edge* than I'd originally intended. I still think much of the film is accurate in its portrayal of those youths not engaged in any kind of meaningful 'play' against the culture that oppresses them, although I'm not sure of the relevance of such an utterly hopeless portrayal of rebellion. Much criticism has been levelled at Crispin Glover's performance as overly mannered, but I found it quite realistic: lots of American kids I've met talk and act just like that. And in contrast to Keanu Reeves (a Canadian actor), who underplays the laid-back Matt, the extremes of adolescent behaviour balance out in the film.

*Over the Edge*, however, remains for me the ultimate juvenile delinquent


movie — exploitation at its very best. Two sequences in the film stand out as exemplary of the genre, manipulating our emotional responses in such a way that we are fully aware of being exploited, but don't mind. The first is the scene in which the cop shoots and kills Ritchie/Matt Dillon, who subsequently becomes a martyr for the 'revolution.' The action is mostly covered by long shots and shaky tracks, as if we are witnessing the event from a short distance, or from Carl's frightened perspective. After the fatal shot, Carl runs in medium long shot away from the camera; cut to a 180 degree reverse angle of him running towards the camera; freeze-frame on Carl; dissolve to him in extreme long shot walking alone in a deserted field. Kaplan's control of exploitation syntax is profound here, delivering the emotional impact necessary to keep our sympathies with the teens as they enact the most extreme acts of violence directed against private property, the supreme taboo under a capitalist state. The second is the closing sequence, in which Carl and the other kids are hauled off to juvenile detention. After Doberman, the bad cop, dies in a huge explosion as his car crashes into the rec. centre (and the teens in the audience cheer), a dissolve gives us Carl in the back of the bus surrounded by other teens as the song "Ooh Child" comes up on the soundtrack ("Ooh child, things are gonna get easier"). As the bus passes under the overpass, Cory and two others who escaped getting arrested run across overhead to wave at their friends, emphasizing the division of the children. The final shot is a slow

zoom out from Carl, who, after his happiness at seeing Cory again, settles into an expression of confusion and loss. The shot evokes the end of *The Graduate*, in which the two young people at the back of the bus, after the exhilaration of their revolutionary act, begin to realize the significance of what they have done, and the enormity of the forces they are challenging. As opposed to the symmetrical closure exerted at the end of *River's Edge*, with the track into the made-up corpse of the girl in the casket, *Over the Edge* leaves itself open, with Cory still free, to the possibility of future action, and battles not yet fought. □

## NOTES

1. Situationists are not big on referencing, presumably eschewing the reification and ownership of ideas. At any rate, I received this article in the mail without reference to its source, and quote from it without permission.
2. See note #1.
3. Bob Black, "What is 'Situationism.'" See note #1.
4. The ads for the 1982 release of *Over the Edge* bill Matt Dillon's name over the title, and prominently display his pictures as if it is a vehicle for him.
5. See my article, "Rap/Punk/Hollywood: Beat Street and Out of the Blue in Cine-Action!" no.1.
6. *NY Rocker*, March 1982, p. 26.
7. Elliott Leyton, *Hunting Humans: The Rise of the Modern Multiple Murderer*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1986, p. 26.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
9. Cebe/Linda Manz, the young 'punk' heroine of Hopper's *Out of the Blue*, is similarly associated with truck driving as an expression of independence and the transgression of gender roles.

ROMAN  
**POLANSKI**



*La Métamorphose*  
DE  
**KAFKA**

STEVEN BERKOFF

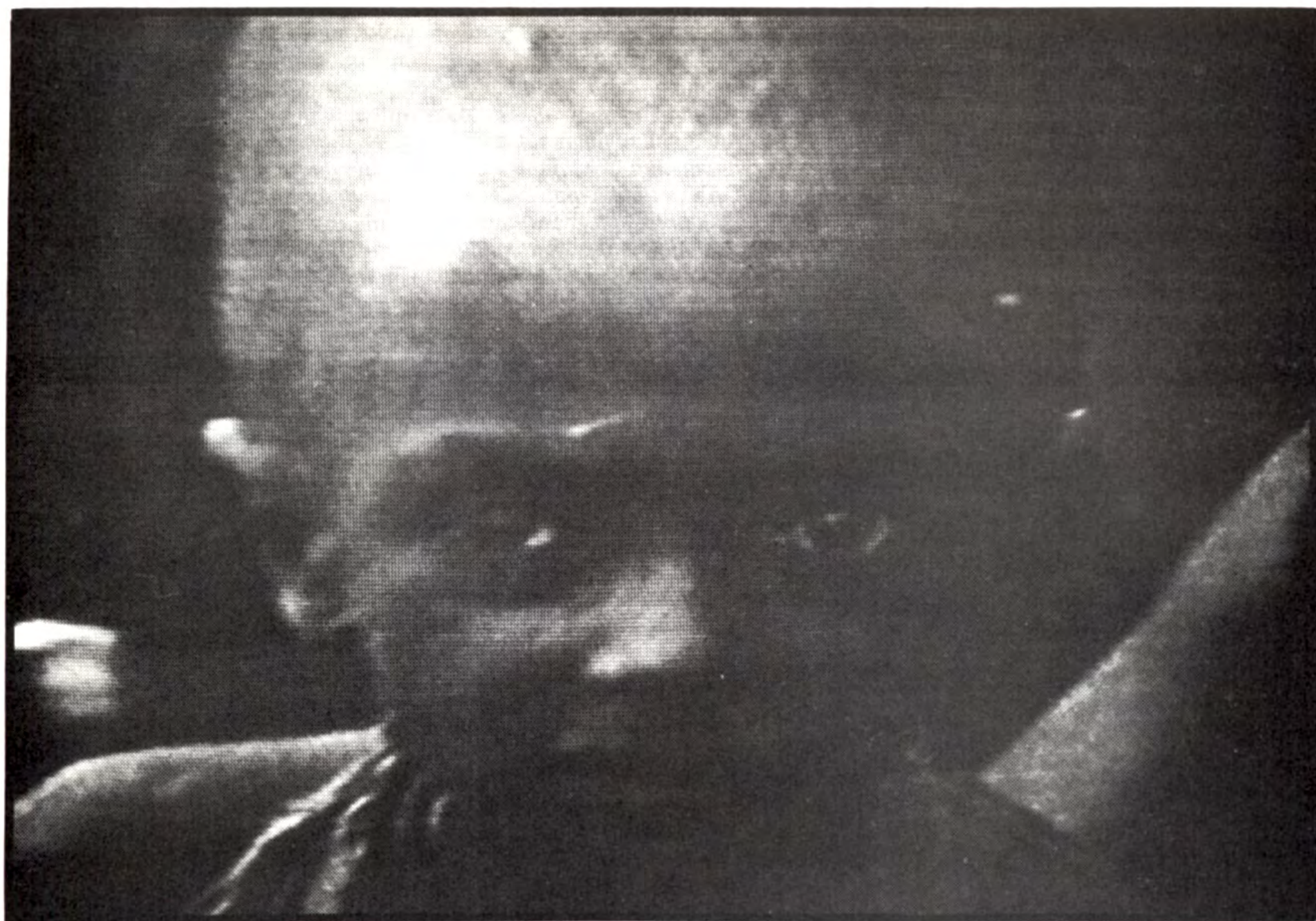
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# YOUR LIFE IS A FILM

by Janine Marchessault

**M**ICHAEL JACKSON'S latest video extravaganza exemplifies the culture industry's efforts to package political struggle(s) as an exciting and 'meaningful' commodity. *Man in the Mirror* has Jackson pondering that old looking glass. The reflection he sees, however, is not his own re-sculpted, re-textured, re-coloured, white but black-enough-to-jive face. In its place appears a re-sculpted, re-textured, re-coloured, white but black-enough to connote the "elsewhere" parade of political icons. Out of context, out of history, the predominantly male figures of Jackson's video function as silent testimonials to his 'profound' lyrics: "If you want to make the world a better place, you've got to look at yourself and make the change."

A wondrous gestalt is felt by all: Reagan and Gorbachev shake hands . . . Lech Walesa celebrates . . . Mother Theresa heals the sick and starving children of Africa . . . Mahatma Gandhi greets adoring crowds . . . Martin Luther King supplicates . . . Desmond Tutu claps . . . baby Jessica is rescued . . . whales frolic . . . Farm Aid, Live Aid . . . Willie Nelson . . . Bob



Geldof . . . the homeless . . . a white and black child kiss . . . and the earth is seen in all its mysterious circumference from space.

The last image of this endless tirade is, of course, the image of images. It is with this image — earth viewed from the most objective of distances — that Xerox launched a multi-million dollar advertising campaign, cleverly captioned: "There is no copy." Jackson's video is made up of nothing but copied images, images which are clearly appropriated from the news office's stock library. While one might detect a vaguely self-reflexive posturing in Xerox's solicitation (albeit under very tenuous circumstances), Jackson's use of appropriated news images functions not simply to foreground mediation but to legitimize it. Not 'no copy,' but the *original copy*.

The general jubilation of the scenes depicted as well as the mediated presence of the political heroes (sic), performs two functions. First, the multitude of political struggles seem well accomplished, the problems of the world (which the video subtly purports to cover) appear to have been solved. Second, the struggles are individualized and political events staged as solo performances. The use of press conference/news magazine type footage (images which include the presence of other media), works to draw attention away from the choice of images and direct it towards the centre of the spectacle — the star. Stars who in turn can sell records, videos and films, but who are ultimately unattainable and unknowable — the stuff that myth is made of.

In a few fleeting minutes, the time it takes to sell a car, an entire spectrum of political histories, ideologies, struggles, contexts and concerns are effaced. In one broad sweep, differences are mythologized and reconciled under the most powerful of theologies: WE ARE ALL ONE. As that last image of redemption tells us, human emancipation will not take place on the material plane; it will not be sullied with contradiction but instead, will unfold in the Divine Elsewhere (outer space). Likewise, human suffering, political and economic struggles, death become part of the Elsewhere — the glamour world of television.

*The Seventh Sign* similarly employs the conventions of televised realities to convey and justify its story line: the Apocalypse. In contrast to the media stars of Jackson's video, director Carl Schultz features faceless terrorists, guerrilla warfare and shrouded corpses.

God's wrath is upon the world because men can't stop killing each other and women can't stop being killed (and killing themselves). Television news provides the evidence. David/Jesus Christ watches the six o'clock news with Abby (brat-pack Demi Moore, seven months pregnant) and is deeply saddened: "I thought things would change." As Abby changes the channels in search of something more pleasant to watch, we are bombarded by a montage of images and sounds. The fragmented commentaries speak of atrocities without really localizing them: "Nicaragua had casualties on both sides . . . Iran and Iraq continued their fighting . . . a woman and her four-year-old child were victims of a settling of accounts . . . radical groups in . . . gang wars leave seven dead . . . another bombing on Paris . . . hijackers demanded that . . . a woman was raped last night . . ."

Armed struggles in the Middle East and Central America are equated with gang wars and rape in the United States; famine in Ethiopia is associated with a radical leftist group in Paris; while *The Wheel of Fortune*, capitalism's perfect summation, wanders freely amidst the layers of reified images as a minor and humorous anxiety.

Gone are the comic book representations of the terrorist in dark glasses and a *kuffiya*, gone is the satanic young girl who speaks in tongues. Evil no longer has a name. In *The Seventh Sign*, evil is the more totalizing terror of an all pervasive wickedness, the space invader of space invaders: the six o'clock news. Throughout most of the scenes in Abby's home the television is on; if it is not seen, it is heard. As the film progresses, the sound of machine-guns becomes synonymous with the seven "signs" of impending doom. Terrorist activities and apocalyptic disasters (hail storms, eclipses, earthquakes) meld into one linear trajectory as the course of civilization is divined.

Abby collapses hopelessly when she is told that her son will be born "soulless" (and dead) — for *she* is the seventh sign. The evil is everywhere; not only has it invaded the sanctity of the home (through television), but it has invaded the most sanctified of refuges. There is one last hope, however, and that is hope itself.

Abby's new hope mistakenly takes the form of political activism as she attempts to save the world by contravening in the "fifth sign" — the state execution of the 'last martyr.' Her valiant plan fails and, because violence begets

violence, Abby is wounded. Her real labour begins. ("In every story of redemption, a woman is sacrificed in the fifth act.")<sup>1</sup>

On the operating table, Abby accepts to "die for *Him*" and her son is born with a soul. The violence is expelled from her womb and in ecstatic death she is sanctified. The evil demon of terrorism is once again "out there" and stands in clear opposition to the Holy Mother. Properly mythologized, Good and Evil are restored to their respective places. The world is saved.

The confusion is total and the conflation is totalizing. Political resistance is finally transformed into what the State apparatus has always wanted it to become: terror. And its representations have become what capitalism needs: a commodity.

*Man in the Mirror* and *The Seventh Sign* present both sides of the same coin. An hour of the six o'clock news must provide us with redeeming heroes or extreme violence because it has to compete with re-runs of *Police Story*. The body politic is either an otherworldly individual or a specularized mass of raging vessels — in such a tangle they are no longer decipherable. Winners and losers, victims and victimizers, wars waged in far away lands and in your own back yard. All have a part in terror's spectacle. Different historical/political contexts are elided to favour a clear picture of Good and Evil. The saintly face of Good works to contrast the myriad facets of Evil. Evil unifies all violence as acts of war against the innocent (women and children).<sup>2</sup>

The "harsh realities" of daily struggles, which seem to take place in far away lands, are decontextualized and commodified. Commodities appear meaningful and consumption becomes our political expression. Though we consume these images, they mean nothing to us. Our implication in their realities is nullified by the sheer fact of their reification.

If television once turned to classical narrative cinema to give its news programmes dramatic impact, then it is now the cinema that looks to television to give credence to its dramas. In *The Seventh Sign* as in *Man in the Mirror*, the mediated "electronic" quality of the images is precisely what validates them as documents of the Real. External reality is now popularly accepted as a complete reification, a fabrication, a broadcast. And this is what ensures our distance from it and makes our responsibility to it manageable. Catastrophes, atrocities, struggles of the world have





ABOVE — **Man in the Mirror**: Lech Walesa. BELOW — **Man in the Mirror**: Earth, the image of images.







**River's Edge:** The ceremony of death.

become interchangeable as they converge into one grand signifier for an external Elsewhere.

*Masculin-Feminin* (1966), which Godard made as an homage to the "children of Marx and Coca-Cola," addresses this very problem. Here, Godard warns of the anesthetizing and depoliticizing powers of the culture industries. His idiosyncratic talent for ironic juxtapositions of the quotidian with the violence that underlies it, provides a focus for his critique. As a woman shoots her husband in a cafe, as a man stabs himself, as another sets himself on fire to protest the Vietnam war, the homaged gaze is unflinching. Finally, even the death of one of the film's central characters is nonchalantly recounted by his friends: either he committed suicide or he backed up too far while taking a photograph. Too much distance is death.

Images become the reality that Godard's group of youthful Parisians aspire to. Cinematic reality is what they secretly want to live:

We went to the movies often. The screen lit up and we trembled. But more often than not Madeleine and I

were disappointed. The pictures were dated, they flickered. And Marilyn Monroe had aged terribly. It made us sad. This wasn't the total film that each of us carried within himself, the film we wanted to make, or, more secretly, no doubt that we wanted to live.<sup>3</sup>

Godard's early critique of representation set out to ensure that images and their 'reference' remain separate: "It is not a just image, it is just an image." Today, in a perverse synthesis of Godard's terms, social realities are experienced *just as images*. Images which have come to be, not a signifier for, but the signified real itself. Accordingly, in another perverse synthesis, 'Pop 84' can market its teen fashions with the alluring proposition: "LIFE IS YOUR FILM," an enigmatic warranty which promises everything the cinema offers and more because now: *your life is a film*.

This is exactly what the last of the great modern nihilists, Jean Baudrillard, has been intimating. Critiques of representation have done nothing to contain the technological drive towards complete simulation. Baudrillard's apocalyptic visions describe the collapse of

a productive dialectic (between the cinema and the imaginary), as cinema attempts to "abolish itself in the absolute of reality" which increasingly can only be understood through the cinematographic or televised representation of it. Our experience of real events is determined and denied by the simulacra which is more 'real' than the event.<sup>4</sup>

If Baudrillard's writings have of late been discounted as "extreme — post-modern fluff," then the current specularization of first and third world struggles brings his warnings to the fore. It is in this sense that I feel sympathetic to the intentions of Tim Hunter's *River's Edge* (1987).

Based on a real-life event in Small Town, USA, the film depicts a group of teenagers who have trouble acknowledging the violent realities that unfold before them. Instead of a barrage of countless atrocities and unthinkable calamities, they are faced with one death. Seventeen-year-old John apathetically confesses to murdering his friend, Jamie. As he displays her violated body to friends, he is without remorse: "She was talkin' shit." There is no ambiguity surrounding her death as she lies naked



and strangled by the river's edge.

Jamie's friends react to her death by getting stoned and avoiding it altogether, or by dramatizing it into unreality. Layne/Crispin Glover, the dominant member of the group, explains:

It's like some fuckin' movie . . . where a good friend gets himself into potentially big trouble . . . now we have to deal with it . . . we've got to test our loyalty against all odds . . . It's kind of exciting . . . I feel like Chuck Norris.

Layne furnishes the film with its linear drive and dramatic structure as he draws his friends into a narrative of his own making. Television programmes and films provide the anchorage for their experiences: "We're just like *Starsky and Hutch!*" and "What is this, *Mission Impossible?*" Clarissa doesn't understand why she can't cry for Jamie, when *Brian's Song* elicited sobs of despair. Twelve-year-old boys drive around in big cars and use guns to settle family vendettas.

Significantly, the film opens with one of the 12-year-olds throwing his sister's doll over a bridge. In the distance he sees John sitting next to Jamie's dead body. The doll is grieved and given an elaborate little funeral while the murdered body remains disclaimed. Redemption is nowhere in sight.

Similarly, Feck/Dennis Hopper's affection for a sex doll named Ellie stands in contrast to John's obduracy. Hiding John from the police, Feck fervidly recalls the way he slayed his own beloved. John, in turn, describes Jamie's slow strangulation as a heightening of power relations. Being part of the older generation who acquiesce to romance's master narratives, Feck is stupefied by John's lack of remorse. So, he shoots him. Another body is left to litter the banks and Ellie ends up in the river.

Realities are fictionalized. Commodi-

ties are humanized. And death is just another pretty face in a world of images that derive their power from their pretense of reality. As the real is made unreal, the unreal becomes the only point of reference from which to comprehend lived experience. This is explained with great economy of means by one of the film's aspiring rock stars: "We knew the killer . . . because of that it's pretty hard to be objective. Where we might be all upset but we're not, because we're not objective." We're not objective because we've been made into objects and history is that muddy river moving too fast to be apprehended.

Hunter's gritty aesthetic is, at first, a refreshing alternative to the current deluge of Hollywood's vapid gloss (John Hughes comes to mind). In *River's Edge* nothing is glamourized: the teenagers have greasy hair; they come largely from working class families; their homes are small and cluttered; the music they listen to is not set for popular release. A fair balance seems to inform the film's adjudication as its characters both perpetuate and are perpetuated by the inane of life in the post-industrial world. However, it is precisely in his rendering of the inane that Hunter both perpetuates and is perpetuated by its violence.

The contradiction of living under capitalism which the "real-life" event imparts, is completely forfeited by the film. Hunter chooses to convey his narrative through the traditional conventions of realism when the diegesis clearly establishes a critique of those very structures. Moreover, the film never ventures to frame the stylistics of its own construction or its positioning in relation to the problems it is addressing. Instead, it sets its distance from it and relays events "objectively" as they might have happened in reality. In this sense, Crispin Glover's performance is the film's most

radical component. His overbearing portrayal of a character who believes he is acting in a film takes on Brechtian overtones.

*River's Edge* is what makes the representational strategies of *Man in the Mirror* and *The Seventh Sign* possible. By not distinguishing between itself and the actual event, by remaining cautiously within the parameters of its narrative, it reproduces exactly what it uncovers. In the end, it is nothing but another moral tale.

Through the logic of its economy, *River's Edge* ends as all moral stories do — with ceremony. Properly made-up and clothed, Jamie's body lies in an open casket on the altar steps. Her eyes closed now, it is easier to look at her. Each in turn, her friends acknowledge her death, her silent lips, her rotting body. Though they are still unable to muster a tear, the audience more than makes up for them. Just another purging tale that has nothing to do with our reality.

While the camera returns to it again and again, the corpse's gaze is left unheeded. No place is left unwritten, no gap left to be filled; the reality of death, that might have been represented through a productive dialectic, is buried. Unless its representations are dismantled into a million and one pieces, death won't mean anything to anyone — and your life will be a film. □

## END NOTES

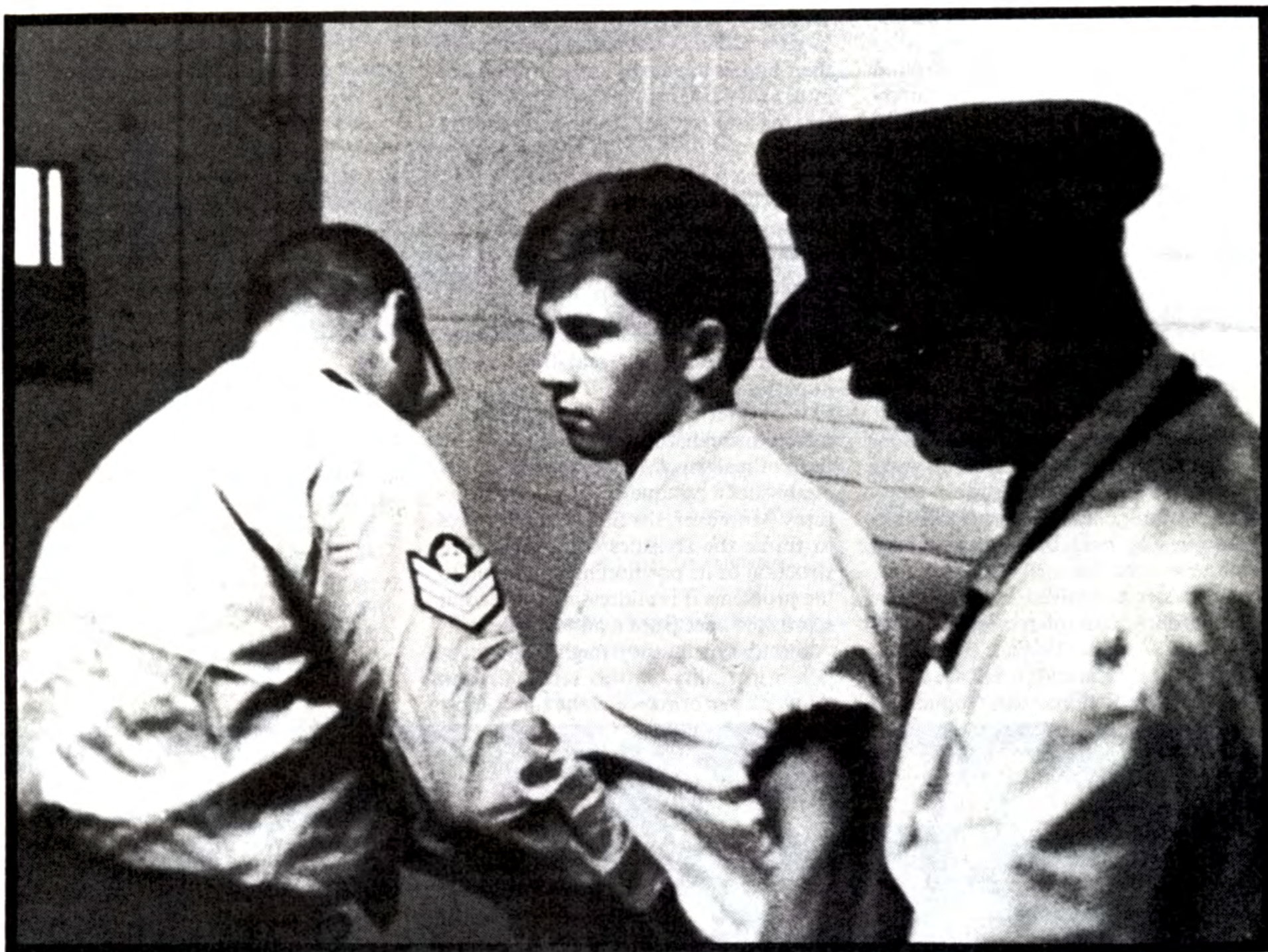
1. Alexander Kluge, *The Power of Emotions* (1982).
2. Cf. Deborah Root, "A Geography of Terrorism," *Borderlines* (Summer 1986).
3. *Masculine Feminine*, ed. Robert Hughes and Pierre Billard (New York: Grove Press, 1969), pp. 138-143.
4. Jean Baudrillard, *The Evil Demon of Images*, trans. Paul Patton, Paul Fross (Annandale: The Power Institute of Fine Arts, 1984), p. 31.





# **Rebel Without A Chance:**

## Cycles of rebellion and suppression in Canadian teen movies



**Nobody Waved Goodbye**



by Geoff Pevere

**THE FOLLOWING** is a preliminary investigation of some conspicuous, possibly portentous but, so far as I know, unacknowledged tendencies in the Canadian feature film. It is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive, but merely points the way for more rigorous analytical study. My point is simply that there is a truly noteworthy consistency of both Canadian features that deal with teenagers and the manner in which they deal with teenagers, and that this consistency might be profoundly revealing in terms of the preoccupations of our national culture. I hope to return to this investigation at some point in the future, when the time is available to follow these preliminary observations through to some possible conclusions.

**GIVEN THAT** the Canadian feature industry has never had sufficient economic and public support necessary for the development of film genres, the frequency with which Canadian features have been drawn to the spectacle of thwarted teen rebellion cannot be written off as response to perceived market demand. It must be interpreted as something significant—possibly something culturally entrenched.

So prevalent is this lure, in fact, that a commanding number of historically and critically prominent Canadian features deal specifically with the conflicts generated by potentially disruptive adolescent impulses: Don Owen's *Nobody Waved Goodbye* (itself a veritable archetype of the English Canadian teen film, made in 1964), Gilles Groulx's *Le chat dans le sac* (1964), Claude Jutra's *Mon Oncle Antoine* (1971), William Fruet's *Wedding in White* (1972), Clarke Mackey's *The Only Thing You Know* (1971), Francis Mankiewicz's *Les bons debarras* (1979), Sandy Wilson's *My American Cousin* (1985), Atom Egoyan's *Next of Kin* (1984) and *Family Viewing* (1987), John N. Smith's *Sitting in Limbo* (1986) and *Train of Dreams* (1987).<sup>1</sup>

Consistently, these films comprise variations on the same dramatic theme: adolescent behaviour, with its deep and perennial potential for social, sexual and political transgression, is something that is dangerous, doomed or driven out. *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, an inadvertently-made NFB feature (it had been processed through the Board's bureaucratic machinery disguised as a documentary on juvenile delinquency)

forged a cautionary cycle of rebellion and failure that would be navigated (with minor detours) by a great many films over the next two-and-a-half decades: Suburban kid (Peter Kastner), fed up with parents' materialism and school's conformity, drops out and leaves home. Finding life on the outside tougher than he'd imagined, he runs afoul of the law, is ditched by his pregnant girlfriend, and winds up on the highway nowhere in a stolen vehicle.

Obviously, the most striking aspect of this scenario (which would be reenacted, in all but scene-for-scene fashion, in a low-budget 1986 feature — *Welcome to the Parade* — made by a director who'd never even seen Owen's film), is its unrelenting fatalism. The predominant tendency of the Canadian teenflick — let's call it the Canteen — is to offer the spectacle of a teenager's futile attempt at social transgression and rebellion. Typically, the teenager presented is motivated by a keen but unfocused dissatisfaction with familial and social conditions as they are. Also typically, the film concludes with the often overdetermined demonstration of the suppression of said teenager's attempts to challenge the apparent causes of his or her anger. While the dramatic depiction of rebellious impulse is perhaps common to any country that's ever produced a body of films about and for teenagers, the demonstration of the ultimate futility of this impulse seems to be something peculiarly our own.

It ought to be stressed however, that the moral attitude to potential adolescent insurrection in these films is anything but unequivocal or direct. In many Canadian teen films, in fact, sympathies are firmly aligned alongside of the would-be transgressor, and the reasons for the kid's profound anger and dissatisfaction are quite explicitly spelled out. Peter's father in *Nobody Waved Goodbye* seems every bit as materialistic and petty as Peter claims he is, and Tony's profoundly violent behaviour in *Train of Dreams* seems a logical, if not reasonable, response to the socio-economic conditions he's a product of. Given the frequent vindication of the Canadian movie teen's anti-social impulses, matters in these films move progressively from the fatalistic to the cynically resigned: even though there's more than just an urgent cause for rebellion against the status quo as it's presented, there's no point to the rebellion itself. As it is in so many other types of Canadian films — and these are

the kids who will grow into the kinds of adults seen in films like *Goin' Down the Road* and *Dancing in the Dark* (1986) — resignation to sociopolitical impotence is a primary and *a priori* fact of these teenagers' social existence. It's a condition of the Canadian cultural contract.

The consistency of this suppressive mechanism is particularly fascinating when compared with the most visible and pervasive purveyor of teen-centred cinema (and the one which can legitimately be called a genre), the Hollywood teenflick. While this relatively new (and apparently declining) American genre has engendered its fair share of grain-grinding exceptions, the "classic" Hollywood model is a largely cathartic and politically disarming exercise which facilitates the simultaneous release and containment of rebellious teen impulses. While this may sound similar to the machinations and motivations of the Canteen, the respective tone and implications are vastly, and tellingly, different.

The most obvious (and potentially revealing) difference relates to dramatic form and structure. While most examples of Canadian teen movies are somber, dramatic exercises in docudramatic realism (like all other strains of Canadian dramatic cinema, they grow out of the documentary tradition), the American model is customarily a comic affair. While films like *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *Sixteen Candles*, *Risky Business*, *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, *My Science Project* and *Back to the Future* present teen issues and affairs as largely laughable (and therefore non-threatening) phenomena, Canadian films such as *The Only Thing You Know*, *Mon Oncle Antoine*, Micheline Lanctot's *Sonatine* (1985), Stuart Clarfield's *Welcome to the Parade* and Ric Beairisto's *Close to Home* (1986) are played out with occasionally suffocating dramatic sobriety.

The implications of this crucial distinction are, in cultural and sociopolitical terms, profound. Most significantly, it underlines the fact that the prevailing purpose of the American teenflick is the defusing of any perceived threats to conventional order posed by the constant threat of teen transgression. Typically, these threats are channelled in a cathartic, temporary and largely harmless fashion, specifically into the clarion call of apolitical passions represented by (straight) sex, drugs and rock & roll. The conventional strategy is the systematic acknowledgement, exploitation



and containment of the insurrectionary impulses of adolescence, facilitated by a vicarious indulgence in antisocial mayhem (the party, the car chase, the school takeover) that is both satisfyingly anarchic and finally harmless. It's just a joke.

But while the seriousness of tone (and comparative conservatism of form) of the Canteen might suggest that our teen movies take the antisocial impulses of adolescence more seriously and realistically, the American model actually acknowledges a far more substantial danger to the status quo than the Canadian answer does. Ultimately, by merely recognising a need for the cathartic release of socially unconventional behaviour, the Hollywood teenflick constitutes a defensive gesture, a deflection of impulses that, if not channelled in socially safe directions, could potentially be catastrophic (see, for example, 1987's *River's Edge* and 1988's *Colors*). Thus disruptive, antisocial behaviour is always safely recuperated at the end of such otherwise nihilistic exercises as *Risky Business*, *Weird Science*, *Real Genius* and (the Canadian-made but American-set) *Porky's*.

In the Canadian rendition, there is a form of sociopolitical resignation — possibly even cynicism — at work that sees the adolescent impulse to challenge, question and rebel as completely and irrecoverably doomed to failure. If the American model acknowledges a threat that must be contained or deflected in order to preserve social order as it is, the Canteen offers the representation of a society that is too monolithically (if, curiously enough, passively) oppressive for undirected adolescent insurrection to harbour any hope of satisfaction. If the archetypally contained rebel of American films doesn't have a cause, the Canadian rebel doesn't stand a chance.

This distinction is particularly revealing in terms of the primary purpose of most teen movies—with their emphasis on initiation rituals and rites of passage—the construction of adults. While both types of teenflick demonstrates the implantation of culturally-determined adult values in the still malleable teen mind, the adults constructed by Canadian and American teen movies are strikingly different. American teenflicks like *The Wild Life*, *Heavenly Kid*, *Risky Business* and *Weird Science* celebrate the values of enterprise, competition, conquest (sexual and otherwise) and individualism, and their principal project is to demonstrate the acquisition of these supposedly positive values by the teens the films privilege as their

model characters. The final result is the production of socialized citizens defined by values their society holds as necessary and essential.

The adults implied by the Canadian teenflicks, however, as a comparatively dour lot, defined by failure, immaturity, resignation and politically impotent self-absorption. If the lessons learned by American movie teens teach them to succeed within the accepted ideological confines of their society (and this, in turn, is accomplished by the channeling of insurrectionary energies in socially condonable ways), the lesson learned by Canadian teens is simply not to fuck with society. Given that society is presented as immovable, uncaring, oppressive and unchanging, why would one bother?

As if to underline the totality of this futility, Canadian films can be remarkably thorough in terms of the scope of oppressive social forces they invoke. While the American teenflick depends for much of its cathartic power upon the strategic erasure or comic exaggeration of such enforcers of social conformity as parents, teachers and police (they present an ideal world in which teenagers prevail more or less unmolested by anything other than other teenagers), these forces comprise a veritable wall of resistance in Canadian films. In *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, for example, Peter is confronted by his parents, his employer, the police and a probation officer, while the delinquent subject of *Train of Dreams* runs up against his mother, the police, social workers and a juvenile court judge. Teachers and police also figure prominently in *My American Cousin* (in an interesting example of overdetermined oppression, the heroine's father is also a cop), *The Only Thing You Know*, *Sitting in Limbo*, *Les bons debarras*, *Close to Home* and *Concrete Angels* (1987). With stifling consistency, the Canadian teen movie offers the spectacle of wayward youth slamming up against the immutable forces of social regulation.<sup>2</sup>

But while the incidents of conflict with professional regulators may vary from film to film, conflict with parents has become a virtual convention—indeed, it is difficult to imagine a Canadian teen movie without it. From *Nobody Waved Goodbye* forward (in that film, Peter's parents — and especially his father — are presented as quibbling, materialistic monsters), practically every film that's taken a teenager as its subject has also taken pains to emphasize the palpable distance and even enmity between Canadian teenagers and their parents. If the parents

aren't presented as tyrannical, as they are in *Wedding in White*, *Welcome to the Parade* and *My American Cousin*, they're offered as chronically weak and inconsequential, as in *The Only Thing You Know*, *Train of Dreams*, Francois Labonté's *Henri* (1986) and Paul Lynch's *Bullies* (1986: a low-budget, Americanized actioner in which the hateful tension between a father and his stepson is finally reconciled by a ritual bonding in carnage and blood. The ties that blind.)

Indeed, the most profound and pervasive form of familial conflict which occurs in these films is rather overdeterminedly Oedipal: son hates dad, dad hates son or they hate each other. In fact, fathers are so casually and customarily presented as impotent, evil or stupid in Canadian movies, it is not unreasonable to consider that one of the dominant projects of our national cinema to be a colossal exercise in the failed (because it never appears to be resolved) expiation of primal childhood trauma. But, since these films have social as well as psychological determinants, we must interpret this proliferation of bad dads in a political sense as well. Standing in as representatives for the society beyond the living room, these consistently ugly representations of fathers conceivably comprise a colossal cultural resentment towards an order that is utterly without compassion, reason or hope of redemption. Moreover, there's something else they share with the world they stand for: they're impossible to get rid of. Just as the father figure has come to stand for conventional social order in American film (and Reaganite cinema has worked strenuously to bolster and reify this stance), Canadian movie fathers can also be said to stand for the society whose values they represent. And in Canadian films, as we have seen, that society is not only coldly bureaucratic, authoritarian and intolerant, it's immutable. The concluding scene of *Welcome to the Parade* could stand as an appropriately cynical coda for most Canteens: after having failed in his attempt to revolt against familial constraints and strike out on his own, the protagonist sullenly returns to resume working at the meat-packing plant owned by his father (again, overdetermined oppression: father is also boss). The self-regulating cycle of rebellion and oppression has again been negotiated. The world has been pointed to as wrong, unjust and sorely in need of improvement, and in the end it has triumphed.

The seemingly tireless cycle of suppression, futility and resignation





Jason St. Amour in **Train of Dreams**.





## Nobody Waved Goodbye

essayed by so many Canadian films about teenagers is, in some ways, entirely in keeping with other observations about Canadian cinema in general, and in particular its basis in documentary realism (which takes as its function observation and not intervention) and its much-commented upon obsession with losers, alienation and failure. But while the Canteens discussed here do indicate a debilitatingly consistent tendency towards representing the utter failure of insurrectionary impulses, they collectively represent a profound expression of dissatisfaction — much more so than the Hollywood teenflick — with most of Canadian society's most fundamental values and regulations. School, state and family are

constantly being held up in Canadian movies about teens as bogus, impotent, bullying — and finally unbeatable. Collectively, that is, these issues begin to resemble the weather as discussed by Canadians: everybody complains, but nobody does anything about it. □

## NOTES

1. Other relevant titles: Don Shebib's *Rip-Off* (1971) and *Fish Hawk* (1979), Jean Beaudin's *Mario* (1984), Don Owen's *Unfinished Business* (1984: a vastly less interesting sequel to *Nobody Waved Goodbye*) John Paiz's *Crime Wave* (1985), Bachar Chbib's *Memoirs* (1984) and Yves Simoneau's *Les Fous de Bassan* (1987). For fascinating instances of foreign directors making youth films in Canada that seems osmotically permeated with Canadian

conventions, see Dennis Hopper's *Out of the Blue* (1980), and Robert Frank and Rudy Wurlitzer's *Candy Mountain* (1987).

2. *Sitting in Limbo* is one of the most convincing examples of the pervasiveness of this tendency in Canadian teen films because even though it focuses upon a racial and economic group — poor black teenagers in Montreal — appallingly underrepresented by our movies, the colour and class of the kids is finally moot: the hardships they endure — unemployment, eviction, parental indifference, unwanted pregnancy — are precisely the same as those faced by the white, middle-class kids in so many other films. And the last shot, taken through the windshield of a car as the principal male prepares to run away from responsibility, is an eerily identical echo of the final shot of that other NFB exercise in teen fatalism, *Nobody Waved Goodbye*. Clearly, ours is an equal society after all.

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# PATTI ROCKS THE BOAT:

## a conversation with

### David Burton Morris and Gwen Field

by Robin Wood & Richard Lippe

#### INTRODUCTION

In 1975, at the Edinburgh Film Festival, John Anderson and I saw a new American independent feature film called *Loose Ends* and met its writer-directors David Burton Morris and Victoria Wozniak. There was an instant *rapprochement*, and we invited them to our home in Coventry for a weekend, when we talked about *Loose Ends*, the cinema, and life and love in general.

*Loose Ends* was made in close association with its two leading players, John Jenkins and Chris Mulkey (already friends of David and Vicky) who collaborated on the scenario and dialogue. It concerns two men, Eddie (Jenkins) and Billy (Mulkey), who work in a garage. Eddie is married (somewhat precariously) to Ginny, or 'Gin' (played by his then wife Linda Jenkins); Billy's marriage has broken up. The loose-ended, inconsequential narrative has Billy — inveterate drifter and womanizer — luring the more mature and stable Eddie away from domesticity into a journey that goes nowhere because it has nowhere to go; the two men end up more or less where they started, with nothing resolved, but with their sense of dissatisfaction more crystallized, closer to the surface. I subsequently wrote about the film in *Film Comment*:

*Loose Ends* is not really a genre movie, but it relates very interestingly to a current sub-genre that obviously has great sociological significance: the male duo/road movie, inaugurated by *Easy Rider* and still proliferating. More lucidly than most of the cycle, *Loose Ends* makes the essential connections between the male relationship, the desire for flight, and the increasingly manifest strains in Western society. The film is also somewhat more conscious than most (without being overly explicit) of the bisexual implications of the male duo pictures.

Twelve years and various relationships — both real and fictional — later (with David and Vicky's the only union surviving from that far-off original period), *Patti Rocks* takes up the lives of Eddie and Billy, with the same actors in the roles and a decade of feminist consciousness intervening. David Morris was in Toronto to promote the film, with his producer Gwen Field. Richard Lippe and I interviewed them, the interview swiftly transforming itself into a conversation of some intimacy, in which the concerns of our personal lives played as active a part as a discussion of the film.

Richard and I have great affection and admiration for *Patti Rocks*: it belongs in that small group of distinguished and intelligent oppositional movies of the '80s that challenge the prevailing right-wing reactionary hegemony. We also think the film is quite seriously flawed. We originally intended to accompany this conversation with a short critical account of the film (more positive than adverse), but we feel that the necessary points are covered in the dialogue with Gwen and David, and that our reservations are implicit in our questions.

We want to thank Marilynne Friedman of New World Pictures for making our meeting possible. The conversation took place on January 31, 1988.

Robin Wood



**ROBIN WOOD:** *We are suffering from the disability of not having seen Purple Haze.*

**DAVID MORRIS:** It's on tape up here. Darth Vader or whatever you call him owns it. They never released it theatrically, as far as I know. I'm actually only about 60% satisfied with that picture. I had an asshole as a producer, who wanted to be a director.

**RW:** *Then there was a lot of interference.*

**DM:** Oh, totally, totally. At the cutting, he threw Vicky out of the cutting room, and she wrote it and exec produced it, these were the sort of battles we had.

**RICHARD LIPPE:** *Was this film done for a major studio?*

**DM:** Well, we raised a limited partnership, \$250,000 and it took a year and Vicky did all that. Then we needed another \$250,000 for the music, we had 22 great songs in it. We took it to the US Film Festival in Park City, Utah, the one that Robert Redford runs, called Sundance, it's a big deal down there and we won the Grand Prize. Then three weeks later Columbia bought it and proceeded to just dump it. Four cities. It made the top 10 lists in the papers in LA the day they pulled it out of the Cineplex, it only played five days.

**GWEN FIELD:** And I took eight of my friends to see it.

**DM:** I'm happy with the third act and the beginning of the picture, but the second act I don't like much, it needs more cutting, more time, and there were too many fights in the cutting room with this guy. I just got exhausted.

**RW:** *We had quite a lot of questions about the new film, Patti Rocks.*

**DM:** Well, I'm much happier with that.

**RW:** *I've got this as a basic lead-in question. The dominant tendency in this age of right-wing hegemony, reaction, AIDS panic, has been a swing back to the so-called good old values of family, monogamy, domesticity, with the inevitable subordination of women that goes with this. I wanted to ask whether you saw Patti Rocks from the start as a deliberately oppositional film or did it evolve spontaneously out of your involvement with the actors and out of your desire to look at Loose Ends 10 years later?*

**DM:** I made it for a lot of reasons, and there's a lot of ways to answer this. I had obviously not seen *Fatal Attraction* when I started *Patti*, and it's sort of like the inverse of that: there Glenn Close is trying to destroy the nuclear family and she has to die for it and be punished. In my film, obviously no one dies from marital infidelity, Billy doesn't learn a lesson, and he continues on. But I set about doing *Patti* because having moved out to Los Angeles with Chris Mulkey right after we finished *Loose Ends*, I had gone through the wringer of the Hollywood development film deals, two at Warner Brothers that had never gotten made, one at Tri-Star. I got hired and fired by a couple of different studios, and then the experience with *Purple Haze*, which I did independently also, and then having seen a major company release it and then bury it, I was getting very discouraged thinking and wondering if I was ever going to direct again. I was the original director on *Volunteers*, I don't know if you remember that Tom Hanks/John Candy movie. I got the boot from that because they got the money (the producer is now my agent, I never had a problem with him), but the money people, Silverscreen, which is HBO's theatrical division, got paranoid that I couldn't handle a \$12

million budget and that I was too young and inexperienced and they made a mistake. But I got some sort of rap around me after that, undeservedly, that I was difficult and the offers stopped coming in for me so I turned to writing *Patti* and it was like self-therapy, doing it by myself and not telling anyone that I was doing it, and I started to think that the only time I enjoyed making or directing a picture, was with *Loose Ends*, where I had total freedom and I was working with my friends, and I said why not do a sequel to a picture that very few people had seen, just a few esteemed film critics like yourselves and some film festival directors and film festival audiences, and a few first-run audiences in New York. I wanted to get to the point where I enjoyed directing again, I had lost my passion for trying to tell stories and so that was another reason I made the picture. And another reason why *Patti* is the way it is, is I'd been around the American independent movement almost from its conception. I was really early with *Loose Ends*, actually it was almost ahead of its time, and before it really started to take off. People didn't realize that you could make money on these things until *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, and that was about '78 or '79 and *Loose Ends* was made in '75. I've gotten really tired in the last few years of these bland wholesome American independent pictures where it's always someone coming of age, whether male or female, either out in the farmlands, or in the inner city. And the American Playhouse primarily backed all these things and it's government money. They all have a sameness to them, none of them took risks, so I purposely wanted to make a picture that would rile audiences up, especially in the first half, really piss people off. I've been very successful because I lose part of my audience in the first half because they don't know that indeed I have made a feminist picture as a male and that there is more along the road than these two guys rapping about female body parts and so on. I wanted to make a controversial picture because I think as an American independent you are battling the studio machinery, you're battling the star system, the megabuck advertising campaigns and with *Purple Haze*, which was another labour of love that did not turn out well, just got buried in the cracks and I wanted to make something that the studios wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole. I wanted to do something that was on the edge, a total risk and I felt that I had nothing to lose as a director because if my film failed and I failed, I'd be right back where I started from which was nowhere. I was jobless, between pictures for three years and I felt like the baseball metaphor, you only have so many chances at the plate and this was my third time up and what did I have to lose to push something to the edge.

**GF:** My background is that I started making movies in France and I really wanted to make French movies, but I moved to Hollywood because that's where the big jobs are and I was shocked by the factory system. You could just keep beating your head against the wall. I met David and Victoria about five or six years ago because our kids were in nursery school together, and then later, when I got to know David a little better in a writing class that we were taking and we started talking specifically about a movie called *The Mother and the Whore* by Jean Eustache that had been pivotal in my life, and David happened to be one of the few people in the States who knew about it, so I was interested right away when he seemed to be so passionate about it. One day I said that if you ever make the American version of it, I would like to produce it because that's the movie I want to make.



**DM:** I had been toying with it for years, I just didn't know how to approach it.

**GF:** And the other thing I've been figuring out lately is that I spent my 20s (after graduating from Brooklyn Phi Beta Kappa) getting sex education and most of the men I met were like Billy. I also realized yesterday that professionally most of the men I met were like Billy. I got fired from a lot of jobs because I wouldn't sleep with my boss and those people were a lot like Billy too. So the film was very important to me. I achieved my goal. I made a French movie in America.

**RL:** *Since Billy is working-class and they identify themselves as blue collar, is his attitude meant to be typical of the working-class?*

**GF:** Ninety percent of the men of the world are like Billy. You know, maybe in America and Canada in the last twenty years things are changing and there is this sort of veneer placed over it so that people think that maybe it doesn't exist anymore, but if you go to Europe, or Turkey where my ex-husband is from, you are going to find that on any level of society.

**DM:** The only reason these guys are blue collar workers is because it picks up the same two guys 12 years later. They could be executives of two large corporations and they would be more insidious because they have more money and power and they can buy what they want and discard it. Billy has to get his through charm and guile, and so I think sexism on any level, is classless. It transcends all class.

**RL:** *Do you think that there is a distancing factor involved here because the male viewer can say 'I'm not like Billy, I don't say those kinds of things or wouldn't have that kind of conversation, so there's really no connection with my life and how I treat women or how I perceive women.'*

**GF:** But that's the minority position.

**DM:** But I think that is an interesting point, because your movie-going public, maybe they are blue collar, but times are tough, they can't afford to pay a babysitter to go to see this picture. So we are probably going to get the white collar yuppie audience who might feel superior to Billy, but if the guys are honest and I'm honest, I'd say there's a lot of Billy in me or a lot of this material would not have come out of me and I'm certainly not blue collar. I'm well educated. I might not have expressed those attitudes in Billy's vernacular, but I've had affairs where you do just want to come and disappear as soon as possible, you want to get out of there and get back to your wife. Billy has a certain poetic way of speaking, his riffs are almost like poetic lyricism when he starts really going on and on, but, you know, basically, I've had those same feelings and a lot of men. If they are being honest admit that they have had those same feelings.

**RW:** *It seems to amount to an uncompromising critique of marriage as a social institution, so it's somewhat surprising to learn that Chris Mulkey and Karen Landry are in fact husband and wife.*

**DM:** You know I've been married still for 13 years. I'm just a cynical guy, Robin, I don't know what to say on that. I work purely from instinct and gut, I'm not too cerebral. I didn't ponder a lot of the nuances and the meanings of the breakup of the nuclear marriage. I've thought a lot more about that since the film was done, and also in a reaction to *Fatal Attraction*, because I don't think that Lyne had much of an idea either. That's your job to analyze and dissect, I

just work from gut. I wasn't trying to paint a bleak picture of the nuclear family and marital bliss, I just carried on with the character the way I naturally thought he would progress after 12 years. You saw the seeds of Billy's discontentedness, his sort of latent hatred for women in *Loose Ends* when he was talking about his ex-wife with the alimony payments, when he goes to see her and she's not there and he calls her a fucking bitch through the door. We tried to fantasize where Billy would be at 12 years later and I wasn't trying to make a universal statement that most men are like Billy Regis or that this is the way the breakup of marriage goes. According to the Hite Report, 80% of women are feeling dissatisfied with their marriages.

**RW:** *The point is that the film does seem to make a universal statement because it isn't simply Billy. There's also Eddie's long speech in the car about what happens when you get married, the different stories, and then the whole thing seems to build towards Patti's absolute rejection of marriage.*

**DM:** You're absolutely right, I can't deny it. Statistics prove that 60% or one out of every two people gets divorced.

**GF:** When we made this movie I had been divorced and remarried.

**DM:** I'm the only one who has remained with the same wife. John Jenkins is on his third marriage, Chris is on his second, Gwen is on her second, and Greg Cummins is on his second and is working on his third. So, Vicki is a saint.

**RW:** *I guess I'm working on my third too, and Richard's a saint. (Laughter)*

**DM:** Victoria is a saint to put up with me for 13 years, and you know, Victoria is tough, but she's understanding.

**RL:** *I wanted to ask about the emphasis on language in the film, the way it is used as a form of oppression, the way that women are being defined. This is then taken up by Patti most directly when she says you can use these names, you can call me slut, bitch, but they're just names and they don't relate to me. You are suggesting that language becomes as important as other means of oppressing women, 'the look' or physical brutality.*

**DM:** That is exactly right. You picked up exactly what was one of my main focusses of the picture, like the buzz-words that men use to define women, pigeon-hole them and stereotype them. A woman sleeps around, has more than one sexual partner and she's a slut; a man does it and he's a stud because that's the natural order of things. I was very interested in getting at the double standard.

**GF:** The wife is the mother and anyone else is the whore.

**DM:** Yes, the whore. Eustache's film gave me the global sphere of where I wanted to try and attack thematically.

**GF:** And certainly he was no saint.

**DM:** No, Gwen was very close with him, among hundreds of other women.

**RW:** *The film seems to move towards the last line before the end credits, 'Billy, there's a word for that,' which in context of the film implies that we have got to find relationships for which there is no word so far.*

**DM:** Exactly right. You are the first guy that caught that. That's great because it's very subtle.

**RW:** *I got that the second time through. I didn't get it the first time.*

**DM:** Billy looks at him and then they cut to black. 'Billy, there's a word for that.' That's great. Thanks.



**RW:** *Well, it's a wonderful line.*

**RL:** *Patti wouldn't say 'I'm a feminist' and again, given her identity as a working-class woman . . .*

**GF:** She's a nurse actually.

**DM:** But we cut that reference out. That was my reference back to *The Mother and the Whore* where the whore character was the nurse.

**GF:** It was very subtle.

**RL:** *Patti has a feminist consciousness and it seems to have come out of her life experience as opposed to having come out of discussion with other women.*

**GF:** Well, she's a grown up. I spent my twenties waiting, I think that somehow I felt that I would get my identity through a man, that it would all come together when I met the right man and all that, and it didn't. So I plunged into the depths of self-hate and married a guy worse than Billy, but Patti hasn't done that. Patti has figured out her life and figured out that she can be happy by herself and she likes herself.

**DM:** She says, 'I fucked a lot of guys, and some guys I don't want to remember, some guys I can't remember and if it wasn't for the baby, I wouldn't remember you.' She's had a rough go, she's a small town girl, I'm sure there's not a lot of women's discussion, coffee hour groups there.

**RL:** *Yeah, I know, I'm from a small town in Wisconsin.*

**DM:** Yeah, and that's why when people say, how can she be attracted to a guy like Billy, and I say that Billy is sort of a charming guy, you notice that he talks to her a lot differently than he talks to Eddie about her, you know the it'sy, bitsy spider thing in the shower, he comes on cute and charming, like a little kid and Eddie says, 'What do you see in him?', and she says he's kind of cute and he's funny, he's entertaining. She doesn't have a lot of opportunities in this small 20,000 population river town, I don't know what the population of Lacrosse is but I'm just guessing, and I think she's had some rough times too and gotten to the point where she doesn't need men.

**GF:** She's worked it out.

**DM:** Yeah, she's worked it out.

**GF:** We have had a lot of criticism about the film, that it's not real because Patti's going to have to be changing the diapers and the child care and all that, and how could we make it such a romanticized view, like she's just going to go off and have this baby.

**DM:** Yeah, but she doesn't get to meet Sam Shepard, the veterinarian next door, I guess. Come on, now!

**RL:** *It wasn't to me very clear why, at this moment, Patti has decided to have a baby.*

**GF:** Her biological clock is running out.

**DM:** That's the way I wrote the character. A lot of women do when they are approaching 35.

**RW:** *What I couldn't understand is if she wants a baby, why would she choose Billy to be the father.*

**GF:** Well, he's attractive, he's tall, you know, his genes are OK.

**DM:** The way I directed, she really did know that Billy was married. She had an inkling, but she thought maybe this thing would work out. Like I said, she has had limited opportunities to meet men. Billy was charming, sort of cute, funny, entertaining, probably good in bed and she thought

this might be it and I think the big thing is that I've met so many women in their mid to late thirties and they want a child desperately and their clock is ticking. I can't tell you the number of women I have met, many, many. And that's why I wrote the character.

**RW:** *Karen Landry says in the production notes we have here, 'It falls to women not to protect men emotionally anymore, we can't nurture this Madonna—whore attitude some men hold for us or we'll have to do that constantly.' It did strike me that Patti does become something of a Madonna figure to Eddie in the film, her lovemaking scene is shot as if she's doing it to comfort him. She doesn't seem to be getting any particular pleasure out of it, it's not strongly sexual.*

**DM:** Yes, she lets him suckle her breasts.

**RW:** *Is that a contradiction?*

**DM:** Well, Karen said that, It didn't. I mean it was pretty obvious that when he goes to her breasts like a baby, where that was going, and what my intent for that scene was, so she can say what she wants.

**RW:** *Growing out of that, my problem with the film is a question of whether Patti is simply too good to be true and whether in the last resort she becomes a new version of the ideal male fantasy figure. She's everything, she's the liberated woman who can still be the mother, who is still willing to give endlessly, she wants to have a baby, she's going to bring the baby up while she still has a job, she's everything. My first reaction to the film was that Patti is simply too perfect, too good to be true, she's too much.*

**GF:** Just like me. (Laughter)

**DM:** When I originally wrote her, really she was more of an icon, she was on her soap-box delivering speeches about women's place and equality, and what Landry did, I thought, was humanize her and I don't know that I agree with you that she is too perfect. I think that she's got a lot of problems too. I mean, obviously, you can question her judgement for getting involved with a guy like Billy, or in deciding to carry the child. I don't think she is too perfect by any means, but it's like horse races, it's all subjective. What do you think as a woman?

**GF:** Well, she's still going to make some more mistakes, I mean the whole thing where she says she's afraid of getting married and getting attached to just one man. She wants to feel attractive to men and that's going to be a weakness for her because she's still going to do that, and when the kid comes along she's going to have to deal with guys showing up and how she explains it to the kid.

**DM:** I see her as strong but I don't see her as perfect by any means.

**RL:** *Is the desire to have the baby connected to some of her feelings of loneliness or is it something to give focus to her life?*

**GF:** I don't know, but just speaking personally, when I hit 35 I almost had a kid. I was desperate to have another child and so was Victoria.

**DM:** You know you could be right. I never really thought of it that way. I obviously, as a male, understand the man more than the woman. That's why Karen's input was very beneficial to me because she really made her three-dimensional. My Patti was the Joan of Arc of sexism up there, but she could be wanting the child because of the loneliness she's had.





Karen Landry as Patti Rocks.



**RL:** *What seems to be implied is that she wants something more concrete, more substantial. She's gone through that quite often with men, and she wants more in her life than pizza, beer, and a fuck.*

**DM:** I think that's the reason she responds to Eddie so well. They opened up to each other.

**RW:** *They still seemed to point to the idea that it is necessary to redefine relationships and look for new ones, as that last line suggests. We have this exactly in the gay community, this constant split between the monogamous relationship on the one hand and total promiscuity on the other. It's very hard to find anything in between where one person can relate to several others and have very good relationships.*

**GF:** I think the gay community has dealt with that situation better.

**RW:** *It should be easier for them.*

**GF:** I have some friends, a gay couple who have been together for 20 years, they're in their forties and they have their main relationship, but they know that they are doing things on the side occasionally, but it's a healthy thing. I remember when I was in high school I had a physiology teacher who said that she felt that everyone should have four marriages in their lifetime. A young love and marriage relationship, and then the one where you have the children and you raise them, and then the middle-aged one, and then the golden years relationship and that that is the way it should be. That human beings were meant to change in their lives.

**RW:** *The answer to someone like Patti seems to be to have about four simultaneously rather than one after the other.*

**DM:** I don't know, Robin.

**RW:** *A rejection of marriage on the one hand and desire for a number of men on the other hand.*

**GF:** I don't think it was simultaneously. Billy is the one that keeps it hectic and can do it simultaneously, with several partners.

**RW:** *Yes, but that is not the same thing because that is simply sexual promiscuity. What I'm suggesting is the possibility of a number of real relationships.*

**DM:** I think some people are capable of loving more than one person, but I also think a lot of people aren't.

**RW:** *Isabelle Huppert in Heaven's Gate says that she is. She doesn't succeed because the men won't let her.*

**DM:** But I saw that situation and it gets rather hectic. At one point I was living with two women at the same time and neither one knew about it. I loved them both and eventually both left me.

**RW:** *Well, they ought to know, I think.*

**GF:** Well, I had a relationship myself where both men did meet.

**DM:** And that's one reason I married Vicki. I was so exhausted and she was so great, you know, and I said I'm ready to settle down.

**GF:** That's also what happened to me, I guess.

**RL:** *I think it demands a mutual acceptance by both parties that they want that.*

**DM:** But you can never get that.

**RL:** *You can only say that we all agree that we all want*

*this and then settle the differences and different needs involved and hope the needs don't get more personal and more individual. I mean, there are egos involved.*

**DM:** I just don't think it works.

**RL:** *These things are part of loving but there are other areas that have to be addressed. I mean love does not cover all those needs.*

**RW:** *I don't see this as a natural thing. I see it as the way in which the ego is constructed in our particular culture. It is fundamental in terms of the desire to possess. (Uneasy laughter all around)*

**DM:** Well, I should have been a Mormon. I just don't think it works. Believe me, it doesn't work in my marriage.

**RW:** *I don't think it can work at present, but I think that's what the last line of your movie points to. We've got to recreate society so that something like that can work, so that there can be new ways of relating that break the possession/jealousy/monogamy/promiscuity syndrome.*

**GF:** Wouldn't that be great.

**RW:** *The opposite of monogamy or the alternative to monogamy should not be promiscuity in the sense in which the terms are defined.*

**GF:** Or polygamy.

**RW:** *Not when polygamy means one man having a number of women. That's not what I had in mind at all. It would mean a different organization of housing as well, of course.*

**GF:** It's also very interesting that a man can be very turned on by a two on one where it's two women and him, but if you reverse it and put two men and a woman, in my experience it may get very threatening.

**DM:** What about that?

**RW:** *It has to do again with inequality of the sexes. It's Billy again basically. He can be the stud all over the place, but the woman must be faithful. He is horrified as soon as it is even suggested that she might be out screwing another man.*

**DM:** Exactly right. That was the whole point of that one scene where she says 'What else do you want to call me?' I

really wanted to get into that language that men use that quickly defines and stereotypes.

**RL:** *There's also this question of Billy's whole inability or unwillingness to see women as sexual beings beyond their usage by men, in his joking about his wife. He makes their sexual intercourse into a funny story about how she screams commands, and then she says stop, stop, stop. He reduces her sexual pleasure to a joke and continually applauds his own sexual prowess. It's another manifestation of the way he's treating Patti that her sexual pleasure should not enter into this at all. It's a man's world.*

**DM:** 'It's a man's world, baby.'

**RL:** *He's saying that a woman's feelings don't or shouldn't really count or that they really don't have any say in that at all.*

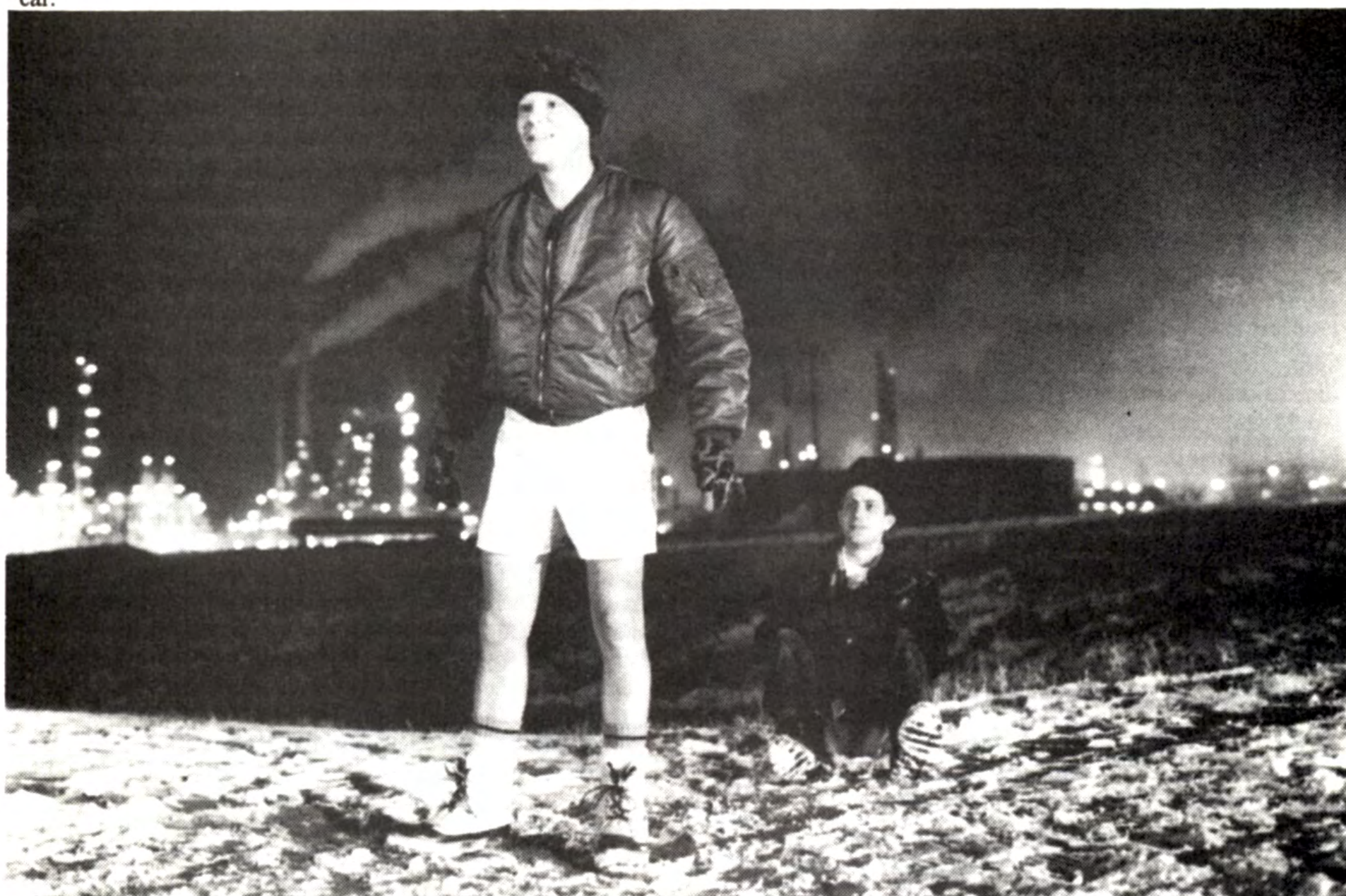
**DM:** That's why I like the kitchen scene so much.

**GF:** I don't know if it is the physical difference or what. I don't really know what it is, but the whole thing where Billy says he'd like to come and disappear, just blow your wad and then go back to your wife. I mean maybe more women would like the guy to just leave immediately, forget that it ever happened.





ABOVE — **Patti Rocks**: Billy (Chris Mulkey), Eddie (John Jenkins) and Patti (Karen Landry). BELOW — Billy and Eddie get out of the car.





**DM:** Never in my case. (Laughter).

**GF:** But men, especially if it's for a whore and not for mother, do want to just blow their wad, get out of there and go home.

**DM:** Yes, to go home to mother. It's true.

**GF:** Yes, I learned a lot from my first marriage. But the woman would maybe want the guy to spend the night and make a beautiful breakfast and I don't know if that is an emotional baggage that the woman is carrying or if it's real or if it's a physical thing. It's an interesting situation that I've wanted to explore.

**DM:** We had some lines where Eddie got into this, but I cut them out because I really didn't want Eddie painted as if he'd had affairs. I really wanted him lonely and yearning for Gin, from *Loose Ends*. But he was saying 'In the morning it's always that cup of instant coffee and you're looking at each other over the table wondering what the hell did we do.' Those were Eddie's lines and it didn't seem right to give them to Billy, but that's sort of true, it's always 'Do you want a cup of coffee?' and it's always that shitty instant coffee in the hot water and you look at each other and think well, it's been nice.

**GF:** That's the whole fantasy land, frontier land . . .

**DM:** I was very interested in that stuff, you know I was talking about the kitchen scene. Patti's lines are great where she says 'Fill the hole and come, is that all there is?' and he says, 'Yeah, basically.' She says 'Then what about us, don't you ever think about us?' And I think it is very, very true.

**RL:** *I like her line where he says 'It's a man's world' and she says 'Not without us.'*

**DM:** Yeah, who would you have to feel superior to? Who would you have to get your rocks off? That was the heart of what this picture is about, that kitchen scene, I've got to credit Landry for making it realistic and believable without giving speeches, it was just intercourse dialogue. She wasn't on a soapbox there, she was just saying 'Tell me, I really want to know, what is it with you guys, is this all there is?'

**RW:** *I'm not entirely clear as to why she sends Billy back to his wife. I can see that she realizes that that is what he needs, that he must have his family in order to function. But it seems to show a certain insensitivity to the poor wife, who probably does not need Billy in the least.*

**GF:** Yes, but the wife, to the mistress, is not a three-dimensional person and you are not being selfish. Why would you think about her?

**RW:** *From the point of view of Patti, very much, because I think Patti seems to have a highly developed feminist consciousness and this is another woman. She should find it much easier to empathize with her simply because of her position as a woman.*

**DM:** I can agree with that, but in terms of drama . . . The last thing that Billy wants is that his wife should find out. That's why they made the journey in the first place.

**RW:** *It is obviously a wretched marriage.*

**DM:** For Alice, yes.

**GF:** Well, Alice probably has blinders on and will take them off or not in the course of her marriage.

**RL:** *Alice to a certain extent accepts that Billy is disturbed when she doesn't answer the phone, because he assumes she's always at home.*

**DM:** You guys are great, you've really listened to my film.

**GF:** In terms of my own experience, I had a marriage like that and I was numb until the moment I decided I couldn't take it anymore and I walked out. I didn't pack a bag, I didn't say 'Let's talk about divorce.' I just left with my baby and my passport. There's a point where it turned but before that I was content. It was OK, but I knew what was going to happen.

**RL:** *And Alice has the children to take care of. She's got her job, her duty.*

**DM:** But it's doomed. I can tell you that that marriage is doomed, I'm sure. It will be interesting when we pick it up again in 10 years where we take it to.

**RW:** *I saw in the handouts that you want to do that and that you have actually been discussing it with the actors. Have you any clear sense yet of where it may go?*

**DM:** No, because I want to do some living, a lot more hard miles and that's where this came out of. It came out of our marriages. Chris' first, John's first and second, and I think we all have to do some living again, plus I want to wait. I made this in reaction to being fed up with the way Hollywood works and I want to get pissed off and angry again, and I'm sure that will happen by next week, as soon as I get back. But I'm saving that. The one thing that I know is that I'm not beholden to their pursestrings. I can go off in the middle of nowhere with very little money and make an interesting movie as I have done in my life on three different occasions, so that's my ace in the hole just to get me excited about working again. But I don't even want to think about it. I'm glad that people in this room are responding to this film, but all the money in Hollywood wouldn't get me to do a third piece for another 10 years. I want to see the actors age. It's really interesting the way John has aged. Chris has gotten a little chunkier, but he basically looks like the old Billy. It's those cold Chicago winters. Chris is out there on the beach surfing and John is taking the subway into work and he's changed. He's all gray now. In the first picture he wasn't gray and I want to see the age thing happen again. I think it's very interesting: when I'm 60 to have done three of these to see my youth and theirs fly by.

**RW:** *What I most want to know is what is going to happen to Patti and is there going to develop any viable relationship between her and Eddie, a non-marriage friendship with sex or something like that.*

**DM:** Yes, I think they might. I'm sure that we are going to have to touch bases with that 10 years from now, there's no way that we can't touch bases with that. We could deal with the Gin divorce off-screen, because you saw the roots of that definitely in *Loose Ends*. I think we will have to touch base with that and obviously Karen Landry, will want to appear in the third picture, so I'm sure of that. Who knows if Chris' and Karen's marriage will last 10 years. I'm sure it will but you never know. So much has come out of Vicki's and my observations. I went to private and public schools and *Loose Ends* was about my public school friends, at age 24 or 25, whatever I was then. Really having no future and no hope, locked in the dead end jobs and that's really why we made that picture and *Patti* came out of a lot of our own life experiences. And that's why I don't want to think about it for quite a while. I'll start thinking about it in five years.

**RW:** *The other thing which I think is very intriguing, is*



*that both the films are haunted by a shadowy gay subtext. It comes out in the language of Patti Rocks quite often, lines like 'what do you want me to do, hold your hose?' and things like that. The film seems to suggest finally that the two men can only make physical contact through violence after the love-making scene between Eddie and Patti, when Billy actually comes to bed with Eddie and then they fight.*

**DM:** I did that for you, I just couldn't go all the way. I'm sorry.

**RW:** *But I find it very interesting in terms of the whole central concern of the film with the gender difference between men and women, because a lot of psychoanalytical theory attributes that at least partly to the repression of a natural and innate bisexuality in human beings which creates the norm of male equals masculine, female equals feminine and never the twain shall meet.*

**GF:** Except for procreation?

**RW:** *Yes. What I mean is that it's what creates the sharp gender division between the Billys and the Pattis. Billy cannot understand Patti, he can't make contact with her as a woman because he's actually repressed his own feminine side, which would include an openly bisexual side.*

**DM:** Billy is homophobic, you know. I had that one scene in there, what did we call it? - the sex change scene.

**RW:** *Where he confuses being gay with being a transsexual.*

**DM:** But if anybody were to suggest to Billy Regis that he had latent homosexuality, he would punch your lights out.

**RW:** *Exactly. And isn't that why he's so disturbed by the woman in the other car?*

**DM:** Well, yes indeed. She's playing his own verbal game and he's scared shitless.

**RW:** *Does she shout out 'faggots' at them?*

**GF:** Yes.

**DM:** That's what she says, rotate on this, and that's what gets his dander up.

**RW:** *And then he immediately has to start talking about his 28-inch cock.*

**DM:** Exactly right.

**RW:** *Because he thinks gays don't have cocks or hard-ons.*

**DM:** Well yes, she pushed his button there.

**GF:** It's the whole buddy movie.

**DM:** Very good, because two guys on the road, one guy in his underpants: What are they doing out there, two guys with one in his underwear, in the snow?

**GF:** And she says 'Is that your boyfriend?'

**DM:** She's baiting him. I work gut instinct and thematically it is correct, I think, but I don't really think a lot about the things I do, they just seem correct. I gave the actors shared credit, but that was my scene from top to bottom and it works, but in terms of just why, I simply had to get out of the car with the guys and then I thought, what's the reason for getting out of the car so I came up with this image of a woman verbally abusing Billy and talking to Billy the way he talks about women and Billy being frightened to death, and that's the practical thematic side of it and then there's the latent stuff, like the homosexuality stuff that seeps through, but when you're working you don't really consciously do it, you just touch something and it comes out. Film Dallas said 'David,

you've got to get these guys out of the car' and I said, 'Let me think about it,' and that's how it started. I didn't think 'I've got to get someone giving verbal abuse and show his homophobic side.' It just happened.

**RL:** *On another level, is the film perhaps too didactic? I mean setting up the first half of the movie with Billy and Eddie verbalizing, and the second half centred on Patti.*

**DM:** Right, it's a two-act as opposed to a three-act conventional film.

**RL:** *Were you aware of that?*

**DM:** Yeah, but you're talking more conceptually.

**RL:** *Once you see the overall construction of the movie you realize there's a kind of balancing act going on here. We've got two sides, where these people speak their bit and then Patti speaks hers, and the audience is left to judge.*

**GF:** Or they can walk out.

**DM:** I was fairly aware of that in the writing, but totally aware in the cutting. I cut a lot out to make it half and half. It took me two and a half months to figure out. I didn't have a focus. Greg Cummins the cutter was out of town and I took one weekend off and I realized the two-act structure, because when I was writing I was working in the three-act structure. It was a very short first act, the first act ended when they left the bar. When I started cutting, I realized that it wasn't three acts, I had a two-act structure. But it took me a long time to reach that and Film Dallas gave me a lot of time and freedom. I had six months to play with it and I needed every minute of it. So a lot of things that I wasn't aware of going in, I became aware of once I had them there. I'm sure you've heard from a lot of people that films just take off on their own, especially when you have 18 days to do a picture. It's just get the shot and run, and you really don't have time to think, you are trying to capture what feels good. If it feels good you move on and then you can sit down and figure out what you've got.

**RL:** *Was the film totally scripted?*

**DM:** Yes, totally scripted, but it happened so quickly. We only had two or three weeks to prepare it. We were told on Oct. 28 they were going to give us the money, and we landed in Minnesota on Oct. 29, and we started shooting on Dec. 3. And in that period of time, I must have done a half a dozen rewrites, because they said, 'We will give you the money subject to approval of the script,' so I didn't have any time to scout locations or whatever. Every day I was at the typewriter, rewriting, rewriting to the point where they said they'd give us the money. And they didn't give us the money until the day we started shooting.

**GF:** Actually, it was the day *after* we started shooting.

**DM:** So, like I said, I didn't have a lot of time to think, it was just instinct, instinct, instinct all the time and by the time we started shooting, I was already so tired.

**GF:** And I was so pregnant. Doing a movie about a woman being pregnant and being pregnant during the movie.

**DM:** It was hard. It was enjoyable in retrospect, but it was hard. I had pneumonia the whole time and so I didn't do a lot of head work, I was all gut.

**GF:** I got to fire my husband on the first day of shooting.

**RW:** *You did?*

**DM:** Yes, he was the gaffer and in the first night's dailies you could barely see Billy and Eddie and the lighting was



just bad. I said 'Sorry, babe, but he's got to go.'

**RW:** *How did he take it?*

**DM:** Like a gentleman.

**GF:** Well, he stayed anyway and worked on lighting, he just wasn't in charge and he told me to get three hours of sleep a night 'cause he was afraid I was going to lose the baby.

**RL:** *Did you do a lot of rehearsals before you shot a scene?*

**DM:** About a week, then we did a run through and realized that the film was going to be three hours long.

**RW:** *Like The Mother and the Whore.*

**DM:** I didn't have the stock to do that. I would have loved to but what was interesting about the rehearsals was that the actors created a lot of their own dialogue, especially Chris, and Chris started to get scared during rehearsals, saying 'I can't say this,' and I said 'Chris, you're saying that to protect yourself, he's just a character, you know' and then I gave him the pitch, I said 'Hey, you have total freedom to take this to the edge, let's not do what they did to *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, when they turned it into *About Last Night*. We have freedom to lay it on the line. Let's have some balls, let's do this thing.' But he was very, very scared of letting himself open like that for the shots he might get for playing such a character and I just convinced him that it was just a character and you are just an actor. And then the lovemaking thing. They started needling me about that saying, well, 'Let's not do it,' and then they worked on Gwen, and on the other producer and they worked on me and they worked on everybody they could talk to, and then they started to back out of what I thought was a chance to do whatever we wanted to do, without somebody telling us no. There was nobody there to tell us no. (To Gwen: You wouldn't dare say no to me.)

**GF:** Oh, yeah?

**RL:** *Are you planning to work together on another project?*

**GF:** Eventually, yes.

**DM:** It's been great, I've had a great year. Greg and Gwen have been great to work with. It's better than working with your wife because, as much as I love Vicki, working together got to be untenable after a while because you never stop the business.

**RW:** *It must have entered into your home life, in bed, during meals and everything.*

**DM:** It was terrible. So after *Purple Haze* we made a conscious decision to go our separate ways for a while and it's been good.

**RW:** *You took great pains to equalize nudity.*

**DM:** No, not equalize, I stressed the male nudity.

**RL:** *Yes, there were more shots of his body than Patti's body.*

**GF:** When we got the X rating, we thought maybe that was one of the shots that got us the X. We weren't sure, we didn't know.

**RL:** *They don't tell you?*

**DM:** No, they don't tell you at all!

**GF:** As it turned out it was all the language, but we had thought about what else was there in this movie, how could they arrive at that?

**RW:** *Well, it is pretty erotic, the buttocks twitching like that.*

**DM:** I did that very consciously. This is a picture about the double standard and you can apply that to Hollywood love-making scenes, where it always stresses the female nudity and you never see the guy.

**RL:** *You've got Billy actually taking off his clothes on screen, which again is uncharacteristic. A man usually doesn't show his genitals, he carefully turns his body or something.*

**DM:** Yes, he undresses in the bathroom, on the road. That's the thing about having total freedom. Nobody telling us no, or if we are breaking established rules.

**GF:** Aside from the agents and the contracts.

**RW:** *There has been so much so much theorization of the idea that the Hollywood cinema has always constructed the spectator as male and this film seems to construct a sort of bisexual spectator in terms of that love scene. There's the woman's nudity, there's the man's nudity, if anything it's the male nudity that's favoured, yet they are photographed equally lovingly and with a tenderness coming from behind the camera as well as going on in the scene, which is wonderful.*

**DM:** Thanks, that was something that I did think about. I had gotten tired of it as much as anyone else has, just so tired of it. The most offensive films to me are pictures like *Beverly Hills Cop II*, I get such a reaction against those pictures, which I just loathe. I find them terribly offensive. *Cop II* was just the worst piece of crap.

**RW:** *One was enough.*

**DM:** That wasn't nearly as bad as the second, Marty Brest is much more talented than Tony Scott. No offence Tony, but I haven't liked any of your films yet.

**RL:** *I really like the ad campaign: 'This movie teaches you a new sexual position: honesty.'*

**DM:** That was our second try. We knew we had to position this picture so that women would know that there was a payoff - originally we had walk-outs and we still do, but fewer, and that's why I directed and wrote the trailer (and the trailer's great, very funny). Patti is the spokesman, she narrates it and says that "You know, I really love men, but they're so predictable. How many times have you heard this?" We then cut to Billy: "It's a Man's World," and then back to Patti and she's laughing, "How 'bout this one?" cut to: "I know what you want, you liked it enough you came back for more." So we really wanted to let women know that this is for them, and so this was the second try on the ad campaign, after spending a lot of money on the first one: "They thought it was a man's world until they met Patti Rocks." It just didn't let you know what you were getting in for.

**GF:** The thing I've found since seeing the film released, and it's so frustrating to me is that I know about the movie, my friends know about the movie, we've got this nice one-sheet and we're getting these nice reviews, but people don't know about this movie, the market place may never see it. It will probably do well in certain cities, but the Billys of the world and even the Pattis of the world will never see it, and just because we don't have the Hollywood machine behind us.

**RL:** *That's why we raised the question of what audience were you aiming for.*

**DM:** I didn't think about that. I made the film for myself, because I wanted to enjoy working again. There was very little financial risk, \$350,000. They can get their money back on cable and video cassette and they own foreign too,





ABOVE — **Patti Rocks:** The boys on the road. BELOW — Billy's masculinity is threatened.





so I made it for myself.

**GF:** I would like to see the Hispanic population, the Black population and the redneck population see it, but they'll never see it.

**RW:** *I'm sending all my students.*

**DM:** Great. Opening weekend.

**RW:** *I'm teaching a feminist film course, Images and Women, which is very mixed. I have a number of extremely active militant feminists in the class and a number of women who say, 'I'm not a feminist, I'm just independent and individual' and a rather disappointingly small number of interested men, and I want them all to see this film.*

**DM:** Well, some staunch feminists have loved the film, and others have problems with Patti. I got rave reviews from all the national women's magazines, *Ms*, *Elle*, *Vogue* and *Cosmo*, and in *Playboy* and *Penthouse*. So, they understood what I was doing, and they were my first indications, my first reviews, except for the trade reviews, which were great.

**RL:** *Are there any films that you feel are progressive? I was thinking more of Hollywood films than independent films.*

**DM:** Well, there's none. I'm mainly into these channel 4 things, Stephen Frears stuff.

**RW:** *Yes, there are certain parallels between Patti Rocks and Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, in terms of the treatment of sexuality, open relationships.*

**DM:** Yes.

**GF:** Rosie's a very strong woman.

**DM:** Rosie's a lot like Patti. Even with the youth market bottoming out, Hollywood never would have made *Patti Rocks*.

**DM:** There's a Quebec film, *The Decline of the American Empire* that I think has parallels to *Patti Rocks* I saw it after I shot the picture.

**RL:** *It's also concerned with language as pornography, but in a more exploitive way. I thought it was too schematic and laid out too perfectly. I didn't like it too much.*

**RW:** *I didn't either. Neither of us did.*

**GF:** We heard of a movie yesterday called *A Winter Tan*.

**RL:** *Oh yeah, we've seen that.*

**DM:** And?

**RW:** *I think it has an awful lot of problems. The trouble is that it is much too much a one-woman show, a great actress's showpiece.*

**RL:** *I think your film is beautifully structured in a way that that film is not. You know what you're laying out very clearly and there's so much discipline. You don't have a John Cassavetes-like stream of monologue.*

**DM:** No, no. And you know I was pissed that somebody said that it was in the Cassavetes vein. It was all laid out, it was entirely scripted. It just feels like it's improvisation.

**RW:** *If you want to see a really fine Canadian film, watch out for Life Classes, by William MacGillivray. It won't last long anywhere, it only ran for about 10 days in Toronto.*

**DM:** I haven't heard of that one.

**RW:** *It's wonderful. It's about a woman's exploration to discover her identity, when she's moved from the country to the city.*

**DM:** It's not a coming-of-age American Playhouse, is it?

**RW:** *Not at all.*

**DM:** Thank God. I can't sit through any more of those.

**RW:** *It's a difficult film commercially because it's so slowly paced, and the pacing is very important as it has its own tempo and its own rhythms, and they are not the rhythms of TV sitcoms or soap operas or something like that.*

**DM:** I've been surprised that people have accepted two guys in a car for that long a time, you know.

**RL:** *I wanted to ask you one more thing about Billy. Billy has a certain charm, and there's a childlikeness about him, looking for Christmas presents under the tree.*

**DM:** Yeah, for himself.

**RL:** *There comes a point where the option is to make him totally repulsive, which I think would not work either.*

**GF:** He is, to some people.

**DM:** Yeah, but I think that's what upsets a lot of people. They can't stand the guy but they like the guy. People have mixed feelings about him.

**RL:** *Yeah, people come away saying that there's something about Billy and even though you can get really angry at him, you go back for more.*

**GF:** It was interesting. Film Dallas always intended to invest in this movie. It took them about six months to get their money together and we were under constraints.

**DM:** Like winter.

**GF:** And pregnancy and the baby. So I was taking it all over the place, trying to get production companies interested. We got a lot of coverage from the story departments saying, 'Who would want to watch these boring characters for an hour and a half?' We always knew that Chris and John were going to play the parts so we knew that Billy was going to have that charm, but on the written page, people couldn't see it.

**DM:** The head of Spectra Films read it and passed and then I heard through the grapevine that she thought it was the best film of the year. But when she first read it she said, 'What an asshole to think that anyone was going to sit through this.' And then she saw what Mulkey brought to that part, you know.

**GF:** We always knew we had him.

**DM:** Yes, but a lot of people couldn't read past what he was saying on the page, so, I've got to credit that to Mulkey. You don't direct the guy, you just turn him loose.

**RL:** *But again, on another level, it makes him more life-like because people are usually more than one thing, and it does give him a kind of credibility that someone like that could exist, and be all those different things, and still have a certain charm.*

**GF:** Even if he's not going to change, he's going to be charming about it.

**DM:** That's how he's gotten his way so far, through charm, you know, he doesn't have a lot of IQ points but the guy is no dummy either. I know a lot of guys like that. Shit, I've been guilty of that myself, trying to get by on charm. But charm fades, along with your age and your youth. I realized that about 10 years ago. Maybe, David, you're getting old. You're not just a pretty face anymore. (Laughter)

**GF:** Now, do I get to subscribe to this magazine, too?

**RW:** *That would be nice.*



# letters

## Response to 'Whipping It Up: Gay Sex in Film and Video' (CineAction! #10)

Dear Bryan Bruce/*Cineaction!*,  
I marched on Washington this autumn along with 700,000 other people and although the event was called the Gay March on Washington, it turned into something much greater. It became a day for human rights — for gay rights within the context of human rights but not separate from them. There were women, men and some children — an almost overwhelming feeling of unity and strength prevailed.

The desperate need to categorize, nomenclature-ize, and ultimately ghettoize everything is the common shortcoming of critics and theoreticians. It puts a lid on everyone's freedom.

"There are no homosexuals — there are only homosexual acts." Foucault.

In all of the 9 films presented by Naked Eye Cinema this summer in Toronto there was without exaggeration, a total of 7 seconds of homosexual sex on film and this took place in one film only . . .

Hardly the stuff on which to base a critical essay entitled, "Whipping It Up: Gay Sex in Film and Video."

Carl George

Dear Bryan Bruce

Perhaps you get some kind of enjoyment drinking cappuccino and dreaming if some one eats pussy or not; KEMBRA PFAHLER, heterosexual film maker re: "whipping it up - gay sex in video."

I don't approach my art work on the basis of such things, I am not part of the dyke or faggot scene and don't align myself with straights. I am an

AVAILABIST, I make the best use of what's available. I don't belong to Naked Eye Cinema, I simply gave Carl George my films cuz he's my friend, lives next door.

If you have trouble with the supposed use of gay clone footage in "Cowboy Stories" that's probably your experience. I am not old enough to have seen any of that stuff and most of my colleagues might be gay, get fucked up the ass, whatever, bump pussy, I don't care. Why do you?

Kembra

Hey, just found out my song for my film is a fisting theme. That's funny I love it, what luck!

Gimme, Gimme, Gimme my man after midnight Abba done by Leather Nun

Dear Bryan Bruce,

First of all I'd like to thank you for writing about the Naked Eye Cinema Screenings in your article, despite my critical reaction. I do realize, (which is ironic in these circumstances) that films by less known artists have better chances of being reviewed if they are seen in a group- or movement- context. (So maybe we are stupid to insist that Naked Eye Cinema is nothing but a screening facility, which is what it is!) Problematic in my eyes is that the positive aspects of one's work being written about, quickly turn into negative aspects if forced into "a useful context." I find you grossly generalize the films from the Naked Eye Cinema Screening and reduce them to the surface of their themes and to surface-themes: "gay sex," "NY angst," "camp expression," "East Village graffiti-



chic," etc. This way of characterizing these films or any other films prevents the possibility that they can be viewed as individual entities. Now they are just thrown into one big pot and are boiled until all the specific tastes have disappeared. As an activist you must be against any form of discrimination or any form of "labelling." How can you then turn around and pack these films into neatly labeled boxes? I feel "ghettoized" as an individual and as an artist if I have to carry that stamp: "A Woman" or worse "A Woman Artist" and my work: "feminine écriture." It limits the work and it entraps me. One works with one's specific sensibility, yes. But why should a person that happens to be gay, a woman, black or from any other "group," produce work only from within that specific context or look at the world only with those specifically tinted glasses? I believe one's work has to be based on one's personal experience first. (Which doesn't mean indulging in it!) After all isn't fucking a personal experience or being beaten down? The political attitude will grow out of that personal experience.

And camp, what defines the camp-expression in a film? Exaggerated acting, mannerism, over-emphasis on style and surface? - then Bette Davis or Charles Laughton's acting styles could fit in that line too. Some of the films from Naked Eye Cinema screenings concentrate on image rather than gesture. Which category do they belong to? I also don't think that the mythical and historical references in these films are necessarily, or, if then not only, referring to "the other" or "the exotic" elements in society and with that, are just another expression of camp. Again, I believe with this continuing referral to "camp" you are just emphasizing the ghetto that many are trying to get rid of. We have to be taken seriously as what we are, but still without being judged first by sex, color, life-style or what ever.

What you call "an escape from defining or articulating meaning clearly" is a refusal to patronize the viewer to find his/her own meaning/opinion. The work becomes a possible starting point for a possible discourse and is no comfortably served meal. I can see that a film like that can appear vague, especially if a viewer resists this responsibility to develop his/her own opinion, resists this call for participation; but I don't think it's apolitical.

I agree that we live in an increasingly

conservative society (no matter what may be the sexual preference of its members); so maybe or most likely we each, artist and critic have to change the approach to our work and to ourselves and we may have to change our strategies in addressing an audience in order to undermine society's conservative development.

Penelope Wehrli

Dear Editors,  
I am re-submitting the press statement originally sent with films on last Summer's Naked Eye Cinema Canadian tour, with the intention of underscoring the rationale behind our including works under this heading ("Naked Eye Cinema"). In our production, exhibition and distribution endeavors, we are not, nor have we ever intended to constitute a "movement" in any conventional use of the term. We are a group of artists presenting a body of work in an extremely informal and open context. Anyone can join us. I personally feel no obligation to fulfill anyone's sense of political correctness, hoping rather that the use of structured and cross associative image and sound in my work (and the work which I support) will help to allow the receiver to respond creatively rather than opining in a dogmatic and repetitive way. A tendency against repressive influences on the work—in its form or its content—is notable among the film we tend to exhibit, even if the influences, themselves, are depicted in order to be investigated. However, Bruce's article is an example of such influences because of its imposition of a "Gay Identity" on films, audiences, and artists. This attitude contains a strong potential for further ghettoizing those of us whose sexual preferences remain different from the status quo thus reinforcing the existing anti-productive "us" against "them" polemic.

The article was not without some interesting, insightful and enlightening perceptions although I do think that Bruce's treatment of Kembra Phahlers *Cowboy Stories* was rather misogynistic in the presumption of and fascination with the artist's sexual preferences. How does he know whether Pfahler is "heterosexual" or not? Her appearance in the film in no way indicates her sexual appetites nor was there a statement given to such effect, so how does she offer the

"strange spectacle of a heterosexual film maker?" If Bruce reads the cowboy figure as a gay clone (and in fact seems to want to appropriate this as well as the Marilyn Monroe image for the exclusive use of the gay sensibility), that is certainly his prerogative. I think there is much in the film he is taking at face value which is apparently filtered through the context of his gay-first self image. None of this is to imply that I have not stood up to say I am gay and proud, however this is a question of prerogatives, and as we know, nomenclature can do some funny things.

Other items in the article warrant clarification: On page 41 an apparent typo: "*The juxtaposition of . . . material shot on film and Super 8 . . .*" should read: "*video and Super 8 film.*" This will clarify the writer's observation of a prevalent method used for cheap image alteration and synthesis as well as correct the false implication that Super 8 is not film. Further, the example of the accelerated flamenco dancers was not taken from television but originally shot on video for image effect, though the Spartan Meats image still holds true for the illustration of Bruce's observation on the commodification and marketability of sex, gay and otherwise.

Leslie Lowe and I implemented these screening projects and called them Naked Eye Cinema. Our intentions were simply to establish a venue for the development and presentation of our film works. We and our colleagues tend towards a collectivist sensibility because it seems to be the sensible thing to do. We have many strong convictions and many have been active socially, politically, sexually, spiritually, and morally with our convictions manifest in the images which we put out. They must be read ultimately within the context of our other means of discourse, (Many of us are relatively new to the film medium with previous experience in many other fields.), and of course within the context of greater bodies of our film works.

In closing, I would like to express appreciation for the inclusion of our works in your article since, as I mentioned it did contain some thoughtful observations. On the other hand, it might be to Mr. Bruce's advantage to investigate as to whether there might be more than a little irony in the statement by Barthes quoted for the article's title.

Sincerely,  
Jack Waters



## Bryan Bruce responds to George, Pfahler, Wehrli, and Waters

*As the article in question, "Whipping It Up," was meant to be polemical, it was good to get a reaction from the super-8 film-makers whose work I took to task; I find it revealing that there was no response from the Toronto video artists whose work I discussed in the same piece.*

*I want to make some comment on each of the four letters:*

### Carl George:

I think it's obvious that by the term "gay sex" I meant to include gay sexual imagery, issues surrounding gay sex, camp, etc., and not merely the act itself. Further, I've always found that Foucault quote irritating. Of course there are homosexuals, although millions would prefer it if there weren't, if no one did identify himself or herself as unapologetically gay, but merely indulged in the clandestine act in the privacy of his or her own bedroom where queasy liberals needn't be bothered by its unsavoury reality. (The attitude: I don't care what they do as long as they keep it to themselves.) And one doesn't have to be in a ghetto or feel "ghettoized" to express a homosexual identity clearly and articulately; in fact, it's much more useful to do so outside of contexts in which homosexuality has been comfortably assimilated. To fight for the right to be non-committal about your sexuality is not much of a struggle . . .

### Kembra Pfahler:

I liked your letter a lot (nice stationery), but I think you missed my point. I don't particularly care about a film-maker's sexual persuasion when discussing her/his work, but I happened to discover from an interview that you weren't gay and found it curious that your film was one of the 'gayest' I'd ever seen. (I don't care what anyone says, a film containing Marilyn Monroe and a cowboy in leather chaps and a Leather Nun Abba cover is, undeniably, as gay as the wallpaper.) Even if you adopted these images unconsciously, as your letter suggests, my point is only reinforced: an outmoded gay sensibility and its signifiers are co-opted in order to affect a 'radical' pose. Of course a non-gay person is free to deal in this kind of imagery, but for me the practice remains insubstantial and stale.

### Penelope Wehrli:

As to the matter of forcing the works into "useful contexts" to suit my purposes, I stated over and over again in the article that I was very consciously taking the Naked Eye Cinema as illustrative of certain tendencies in gay art; despite the film-makers' intentions, the films undeniably conform in many ways to the gay camp experimental canon. The idea to compare the gay videos of Toronto with New York's Naked Eye — two different media from two different cities/countries — came to me upon seeing the videos after the films and realizing that both were apolitical in remarkably similar ways. I purposely "generalized" (it was more a general impression, a reading of tone) in order to explore these limitations. I don't think that by identifying various continuities and parallels between the films of the

Naked Eye, or even by considering them as constituting a 'movement' of sorts, that I am denying the autonomy or individuality of the film-makers. I do think that the homogeneity of the works attests to a particular New York sensibility that perhaps only someone looking in from the outside might be able to recognize. I recently visited New York, and was struck once more by the insidious taboos that still operate against both political expression in general, and homosexuality in particular, in certain segments of the art community. In such a climate, can film-makers concerned with gay and women's rights afford to remain exclusively within safe canons such as 'camp' or 'art film' or 'formalism?' I fail to see how regarding yourself as 'a woman' (or 'gay' or 'black') in itself constitutes 'ghettoization;' more to the point, refusing identification with such 'categories' corresponds all too readily with the 'postfeminist' attitude of assuming that a state of equality and a cosy pluralism already exists, that militancy and subcultural solidarity are no longer desirable or necessary.

I think I explained clearly enough my views on what exactly defines camp, and how any 'political' usefulness it may have served in the past has been long since exhausted . . .

### Jack Waters:

Thanks for pointing out the typo — as a super-8 film-maker myself, I, of course, do regard super-8 very adamantly as "film."

I'm certainly making no claims for 'political correctness' or the advocacy of an 'alternative establishment' whose rules must be unquestioningly followed (see my article in this issue). But I would hope that experimental film-makers who are obviously concerned with issues of gender and sexual difference might at least address some of the social and political issues that must be part of their experience. Handing the task of articulation to the viewer ("all right, it's obscure, it's arcane — you figure it out") conveniently appeals to the semiotic ruse of the free-wheeling subject who creates the film 'text' at the point of 'reading.' Films that are vague and vogue tend to attract the semiotician who will construct a meaning for the work, relieving the artist of that responsibility. I still think it's possible for filmmakers to express a coherent political project through their work without being didactic or dogmatic.

My observations on Kembra Pfahler's *Cowboy Stories* were intended to illustrate the phenomenon of the co-optation of gay imagery; I don't see how taking her film as an example of this indicates misogyny, particularly considering my views on the exclusion of women from the gay videos and the desirability of the alignment of the gay and women's movements.

And as to Barthes' irony on the subject of co-optation and homosexuality, I might go out on a limb and say that all semioticians are, by their very nature, dilettantes.

Bryan Bruce



## Response to 'Godard on Imagery' (Cineaction #11)

The Editors,  
CineAction!

I would like to comment on a footnote to Bruce Elder's article 'Godard on Imagery' in issue No. 11 (footnote No. 19 on page 19), which refers to my interpretation of an incident in *Masculin/Féminin*. I find it difficult to understand how (or why) Elder should misrepresent me so totally. He writes:

Robin Wood's publicly stated interpretation of the episode is that the scene is progressive; Godard, he suggests, criticizes the homosexuals for hiding their love away in bathrooms rather than allowing it out in public view. To my mind, that interpretation is indefensible on contextual grounds. For one thing, nowhere else in the film does any related idea occur. The film is not, at least as far as I can discern, concerned with the relation between private feelings and public morality. Rather the film is concerned, as its title suggests, with vicissitudes of relations between males and females which result from the sense each sex has that the other sex is very different. Given this belief, it takes courage, as Paul knows, to face up to relations with members of the other sex. **Paul's act, I believe, is actually a criticism of the homosexuals for refusing to face up to the trials of such relations.** Of course, there is no evidence that this is Godard's view; it simply reflects the anxiety Paul himself was feeling at the time and the difficulty he was experiencing screwing up his own courage.

In fact, **the interpretation I put forward coincides closely with Elder's own, though the attitude to it is diametrically opposed.** The passage to which he presumably refers occurs in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, pages 225-6, and I must quote it at length:

One can argue that in Godard's films as in dreams the seemingly inconsequential and irrelevant moments are in fact of particular significance. One such moment occurs in *Masculin, Féminin* . . . . The moment (which appears to have nothing whatever to do with anything else in the film - one can certainly read it as an unconscious displacement of the lesbianism *La Femme de Paul*) is ambiguous: **the men may be cowards because they don't come out and fight for their rights or make love in public, or simply because they are homosexuals** (the heterosexual myth that a "real man" is defined by the ability and desire to possess women, on which Maupassant's story can be read as an

ironic commentary). The former meaning is merely uncharitable and irresponsible, taking no account of the social pressures that make the act of embracing in a public washroom in fact moderately heroic (this is, after all, 1966, when gay liberation and gay consciousness were scarcely in their infancy). I'm afraid, in the context of the whole film and of Godard's work generally, one is forced to prefer the latter reading, far more reactionary and reprehensible. A fairly strict correlation always exists between a heterosexual male's attitude to women and his attitude to gays ("the two others," in Andrew Britton's useful phrase), to the extent that the one can usually be deduced from the other. The repudiation of male as well as female homosexuality parallels the perception of women as, incorrigibly and unreachably, "other," and underpins the impossibility of transsexual identification.

Elder's feat here is quite remarkable: **he attributes to me the interpretation that I explicitly reject, goes on to put forward as his own the one that I propose as preferable, and manages in doing so implicitly to align himself with the homophobia and heterosexism that I deplore.**

Robin Wood

## Response to 'The Skull Beneath the Skin: Some Indiscreet Charms of Narrativity' (Cineaction #11)

Dear Robin,

Regarding the last of the questions that you pose in "The Skull Beneath the Skin: Some Indiscreet Charms of Narrativity" (*CineAction!* No. 11) — "what is the meaning of the walk down the country road (in *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie*)?" — may I offer a third interpretation? Admittedly, to broach it, one has to move outside the film itself and into a somewhat broader context; but I think it provides a more satisfactory view of Bunuel's overall intentions than your (admittedly tentative) suggestions.

Consider the well-documented interest shown by Bunuel in the picaresque novel, and the centrality of that interest to the structures of both *The Milky Way*, the film that immediately precedes *Discreet Charm*, and *The Phantom of Liberty*, the film that immediately follows it. Both can be regarded as fragmented, episodic

films where individual takes or anecdotes supplant any notion of a sustained, over-arching narrative — a form which is not identical to the picaresque novel, but which none the less owes a great deal to that form's digressions, interpolations, and use of discrete incidents.

Consider, too, the contrast between Bunuel's first three and most explicitly anti-bourgeois films — *Un Chien Andalou*, *L'Age d'Or*, and *Land Without Bread*, all three of which do without consistent linear plots — and the commercial narrative films which followed them, preceded by fifteen years of forced inactivity. Clearly Bunuel had to arrive at some force of truce with bourgeois/commercial cinema — including its use of consistent linear plots — if he wanted to continue to make films at all. *Discreet Charm* represents in some ways the ultimate refinement and expression of that truce — an ironic acknowledgement of both a social class and a narrative form to which he maintains a grudging allegiance, both of which survive every attempt to overturn them (on the part of Bunuel and others). The walk down a country road condenses both of those meanings in a single image. Understandably, it exists outside the time frame of the rest of the film, just as the survival of the bourgeoisie and of the narrative/picaresque tradition exist independently of Bunuel's ambiguous rebellions and transgressions against them. (The film is about the discreet — and discrete — charms of narrative, too.)

For whatever it's worth, I've pursued this interpretation at greater length in an article published fifteen years ago ("Interruption as Style," *Sight and Sound*, Winter 1972/73) . . . . My appreciation and thanks to *CineAction!* for continuing to publish criticism while virtually every other North American film magazine has been restricting its major focus either to theory or to straight promotion.

Sincerely,  
Jonathan Rosenbaum

P.S. For getting at the more elusive meanings in Bunuel's autobiography, I'd strongly suggest checking out the original French version rather than Abigail Israel's abominable abridgement and mistranslation, which not only eliminates major portions of the text on virtually every page (no exaggeration), but doesn't even do the title justice. (*My Last Gasp* would be closer to the mark.)



## Platoon



## Contributors

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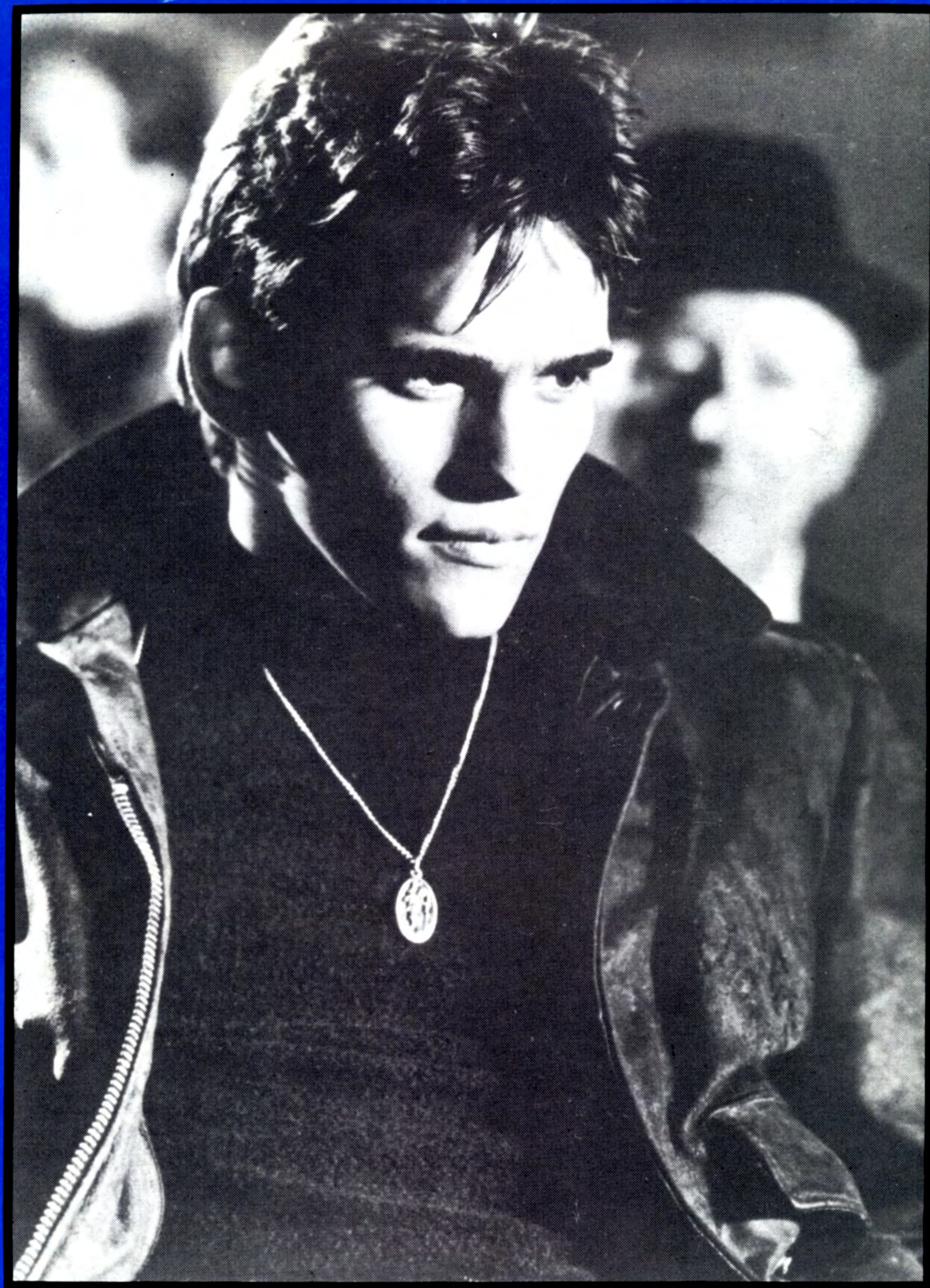
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